

THE
INVESTIGATORS
in

THE MYSTERY OF THE
WHITE DRAGON





in

**THE MYSTERY
OF THE
WHITE DRAGON**

A man turns up at The Jones Salvage Yard with an unusual request to place a porcelain vase there for his friend to purchase the next day. This somewhat rare Chinese vase features a white dragon on a blue background. What seems to be a harmless request turns into a nightmare when Jupiter breaks the vase. The Three Investigators have less than twenty-four hours to find a replacement. However, it quickly becomes clear to Jupiter, Pete and Bob that they are not the only ones wanting such a vase, leading them to suspect that there is a mystery behind it.

The Three Investigators
in
The Mystery of the White Dragon

*Original German text by
André Marx*

*Based on characters created by
Robert Arthur*

Translated, adapted, and edited from:
Die drei ???: Der Fluch des Drachen
(The Three ???: The Curse of the Dragon)

by
André Marx
(2006)

Cover art by
Silvia Christoph

(2021-03-23)

Contents

- 1. Careful, Fragile!**
- 2. The Silence After the Crash**
- 3. In Search of a Ming Vase**
- 4. Prince Valiant**
- 5. A Trace at Last**
- 6. Kill the Vase Breaker!**
- 7. Destroyed, Shaken, Shattered**
- 8. The Potter**
- 9. The Truth Comes to Light**
- 10. In the House of the Enemy**
- 11. Jupiter Sets the Traps**
- 12. Under Suspicion**
- 13. Mr Grogan Again**
- 14. The VTD**
- 15. Invitations to the Meeting**
- 16. Sharp at Midnight**
- 17. Shards Bring Luck**
- 18. Inspector Cotta's Visit**

1. Careful, Fragile!

Jupiter Jones stood in the glowing sun on the salvage yard and sweated. He was busy sorting a mountain of old records into the categories 'Possible Collector's Item', 'For Rummage Table' and 'Worthless Rubbish' when a rickety old Mercedes in stained silver rolled through the gate into the salvage yard and came to a halt with an exhausted puff.

A man in his thirties got out. He was wearing a baggy brown suit that fitted the car perfectly—it was old-fashioned and approaching the end of its natural life. The man circled the car, opened the passenger door, which only gave way after a slight jolt, and carefully lifted a large cardboard box from its seat. Circumstantially, he wrapped himself around the box and looked around.

Since Uncle Titus and Aunt Mathilda were nowhere to be seen at the moment, Jupiter left the record collection to attend to the customer.

"Can I help you, sir?"

"Uh yes, I would like to speak to the owner."

"That will be my uncle, but I don't know where he is right now. Maybe I can help you. I work here too." Jupiter eyed the box. "Do you want to sell something?"

"No."

"Then you're looking for something?"

"Neither. It's a bit... complicated."

Even before Jupiter could continue, Uncle Titus stepped up to them from the small office building.

"Leave it, Jupe, I'll handle it," he said, and Jupiter reluctantly returned to his record collection. Fortunately the boxes were not too far away, so Jupiter only had to listen hard to hear the conversation between Uncle Titus and the customer.

"So, what can I do for you?"

"Johnson," the man introduced himself. "Thomas Johnson. You sell junk, don't you?"

Uncle Titus smiled and looked at the mountains of old stuff piling up all around him. "Looks like it. What are you looking for?"

"Well, nothing. It's about something else. That is why I am here. The fact is my girlfriend, or rather my fiancée, is a collector—a passionate collector, I might add. No, no, she's different, in fact she is a hunter, if you know what I mean."

"Uh," Uncle Titus said and smiled. "I'm not sure."

"What I mean to say is that she is more concerned with searching, hunting and finding than with owning... well, maybe not really more, but at least as much... or almost. Yes, almost as much. So let's say forty percent of her pleasure is in searching and finding. Do you understand?"

"Uh," Uncle Titus said again, and there was something desperate about his smile by now. He squinted over to Jupiter, who immediately understood the hint and left behind the record collection, which he hadn't paid attention to anyway, and rushed to help his uncle. Titus Jones knew that his nephew had a certain talent for quickly grasping complicated connections. In this case, however, Jupiter was not sure whether he would be of much help.

"Maybe you'll start all over again, I'm sure my nephew is interested in the story as well," Uncle Titus suggested and nodded to the man with encouragement.

Mr Johnson gave Jupiter a sceptical look, then shrugged his shoulders and said: "Whatever. It's about my girlfriend... fiancée. She is a collector. But she hates to be given anything for her collection. I made the mistake once and regretted it bitterly, because she couldn't be happy at all as she had not discovered it herself! Do you understand? It's all about hunting, searching and finding!"

"Ah yes," said Uncle Titus.

"So you're looking for a certain collector's item, but you don't want to buy it, you'd rather send your fiancée here so she can discover it for herself," Jupiter suspected.

"Yes!" Johnson replied beaming with joy, but then he shook his head in confusion. "Ah, no, no, not at all! I already have it... the collector's item, I mean. You know what I mean?"

"I understand very well," replied Jupiter amused. "So you want to deposit something here for your fiancée. You intend to give her a present. But since she doesn't like to be given a gift, but her joy of discovering a collector's item is much greater, you are planning for just that to happen—for her to discover it herself here with us in salvage yard."

"Yes! That's it!" This time the glow stayed on the man's face.

"And the collector's item in question is probably in this box."

"Right!"

"It's something fragile, I suppose."

Irritated, Thomas Johnson first looked at Jupiter, then at the box in his arms and then at Jupiter again. "How do you know that?" he asked suspiciously.

"The way you hold the box indicates that it is something very precious that could easily get broken."

"Ah. Yeah, right. Fragile. Very fragile." He turned to Uncle Titus again. "Do you think you can help me?"

"I think so. What kind of collector's item is it?"

Mr Johnson looked around as if he was afraid of being watched, although there was no one else in the salvage yard at the moment. Then he carefully placed the box on the ground and began to unpack it.

Uncle Titus bowed his head and whispered to Jupiter, barely audible: "How did you find out what he wanted?"

Jupiter grinned and whispered back: "I listened to him, Uncle Titus."

Then their attention was drawn back to the box. Johnson slowly and carefully removed layer after layer of crumpled up newspaper, which was blown over the dusty square like desert bushes by the wind. With extreme caution, he lifted something out, and the rest of the newspaper shreds also fell out of the cardboard.

It was a vase. It was tall and slim, gently curved and about as long as Jupiter's forearm. On a deep blue background, a white Chinese-styled dragon wriggled.

"Oh, it's wonderful!" a voice came to them across the salvage yard. Mathilda Jones had stepped out of the yard office and hurried towards them, her eyes fixed on the vase. Unlike her husband, Jupiter's aunt didn't really care much for the goods she was selling. What drove Aunt Mathilda was not her love of the bizarre, unusual and dusty junk, but her sense of good business. And she just sensed one of them. "Do you want to sell this? I promise you, we'll give you a good price!"

"Uh no," Johnson replied helplessly.

Jupiter quickly explained the situation to his aunt. She seemed disappointed at first, but then Mr Johnson continued with his story:

"I discovered the vase at an auction. You cannot imagine how excited I was! For years, Heather... my fiancée... has been looking for a vase with a white dragon on a blue background! Most Chinese vases with dragon motifs are the other way round—blue dragon on a white background.

"Heather's grandparents are from China, you know, and her grandmother always told her stories about dragons. In China, dragons are symbols of happiness... and white dragons are particularly rare. 'If you meet a white dragon,' Heather's grandmother used to say, 'then luck is on your side and you are on the right track.' And... how shall I put it... we want to get married. So I thought, if Heather finds a white dragon just before our wedding... here with you at the salvage yard..." Thomas Johnson looked embarrassed from one to the other.

Aunt Mathilda had got glassy eyes. Her sense of romance was the only thing that surpassed her sense of business. "No, how wonderful!" she breathed. "Mr Johnson, that's the most touching story I've ever heard! What a charming idea! But that means that your Heather will never know that she actually owes this collector's item to you, is that right?"

Johnson nodded. "I'm afraid so, otherwise it would be pointless."

"That must be true love," Aunt Mathilda sighed and looked her husband in the eyes pensively. "Have you ever done anything like this for me before? A gift I never knew was one?"

Titus Jones grinned. "More often than you know."

Aunt Mathilda hooked up with him. "That's what I thought."

"Ahem." Jupiter cleared his throat loudly. "Let's get back to business."

"Business?" Aunt Mathilda repeated in indignation. "But Jupiter! We don't want to do business here! Of course we will allow Mr Johnson to put his vase here, and of course we won't charge any money."

"Yeah, all right, I didn't mean it that way. I just thought..." Jupiter waved away. "Forget it."

"How long shall we keep the vase for you?" Uncle Titus asked.

"Only until tomorrow afternoon," replied Mr Johnson. "It's Heather's birthday, and I'm going bring her on a visit here where she can choose something, and she'll discover the vase quite by chance."

Aunt Mathilda clapped her hands. "Wonderful!"

"Then we'll have to work out a price," said Uncle Titus. "What should the vase cost tomorrow?"

"Well, it mustn't be too cheap or she'll get suspicious. On the other hand, I didn't pay much for it myself. It's not really valuable, you know. Shall we say... fifty dollars? You can keep it then, please. I want you to get something out of it."

"Out of the question," Aunt Mathilda said immediately. "You can pretend to pay us, all right?"

"Well, whatever you say. Thank you very much. Just remember not to accidentally sell the vase to anyone else until tomorrow!" Mr Johnson smiled nervously.

"Don't worry, it's not going to happen!" Aunt Mathilda assured him.

"And your other employees..."

"There are no other employees, just the three of us," Uncle Titus explained. "Every now and then a young man from the neighbourhood helps out, but he doesn't come today or tomorrow. So there is no concern."

"And you'll take good care of the vase. I know I said it wasn't very valuable, but it is for Heather, you know? And for me, of course. I looked for it for so long!"

“Of course, Mr Johnson, we already understood you,” Aunt Mathilda tried to reassure the man. “We shall look after the vase like, er, like a treasure.”

Mr Johnson relaxed a little.

“Then we just have to find a good place for it,” said Jupiter. “I suppose it shouldn’t be presented too obviously, but better hidden somewhere?”

“That’s right, that’s what I thought,” Mr Johnson said.

“Come on, I know a good place,” Aunt Mathilda said and walked purposefully across the salvage yard with Mr Johnson eagerly following her.

Shortly afterwards, they were all standing in front of a high wooden shelf under the corrugated iron roof, which was attached to the fence around the salvage yard to protect the items from rain. There were countless cups, plates, bowls and vases piled up on the shelf, some of them already so dusty that Jupiter wondered how long they had been standing there without anyone being interested in them.

“We can put the vase here without it attracting any further attention,” said Aunt Mathilda, stretching out her hands for the collector’s item.

Mr Johnson involuntarily took a half step back. “I’d uh... I’d rather do that myself.”

Cumbersomely he pushed a few plates aside and back again, took out some saucers and put them back in again, until he finally decided on a small free space at the very edge of the top shelf. It was so high that he could hardly reach. He took a wooden box lying nearby, stood on it and finally pushed the vase very carefully and laboriously into place.

“Isn’t that a bit... wobbly?” Jupiter warned.

“No. It stands perfectly,” claimed Johnson.

Jupiter might still have objected, but at that moment his friends Bob and Pete cycled to the salvage yard and waved. Jupiter waved back, said goodbye to Mr Johnson with a nod and went to meet them. Nothing exciting happened here anyway.

Pete made an emergency stop right in front of Jupiter’s feet, so that the rear wheel lifted and he almost went over the handlebars. “Hi, Jupe! Look, my new brakes! Cool, eh?”

“Impressive,” replied Jupiter without any interest.

“What are we doing today?” Bob asked.

“I don’t know. Helping in the salvage yard? I’m sure Aunt Mathilda has some great ideas.”

Bob and Pete made terrified faces.

Jupiter laughed. “It was a joke! We could sort out old records, but it’s not that urgent, otherwise there is not much going on today. But we just had a funny customer.” He told them Mr Johnson’s story.

“It’s cute,” Bob said. “Where’s that Johnson?”

“There he goes,” Jupiter replied and pointed to the rickety car that was rolling out to the road at that moment.

“And the vase?”

“Come on, I’ll show you!”

“Oh, just leave the stupid vase,” Pete said and remained seated on his bike. “We have no case to work on, and Aunt Mathilda hasn’t pounced on us and stocked us up with work. We should take the opportunity and have a relaxed day at the beach. We’ve been planning this for weeks, oh, what am I saying, for months! But something keeps coming up.”

“We did? You have been planning this for months,” Jupiter corrected. “But I don’t mind if that’s what your heart desires.”

“I still want to see the vase,” Bob said and followed Jupiter to the shelf.

“Up there it stands. Wait, I’ll get it down, I couldn’t get a good look at it just now. I really wanted to know what’s so special about it.” Jupiter pulled up one of the old garden chairs that Uncle Titus had bought a few days ago, which were to be repainted for resale.

“It’s not that important now,” Bob said.

“Yes,” Jupiter contradicted and climbed onto the seat. The chair groaned and wobbled. Jupiter held on to the shelf.

Even the shelf was wobbling...

And the vase...

Even before Jupiter really understood what was happening, the vase toppled.

He let out a horrified scream and reached for it, but he only pushed it further away from him. Bob tried his best, but he stood too far away. The vase landed on the hard gravel ground of the salvage yard and shattered!

2. The Silence After the Crash

Jupiter, Pete and Bob held their breath. The First Investigator had horror clearly written on his face. No one said a word. The silence after the crash was almost eerie... but it only lasted a few heartbeats. Then Jupiter brought out the first word with a gasp: "Darn!"

Bob and Pete, who was now getting off their bikes, stared at Jupe. "Darn?" Pete repeated. "Is that all you can say? Jupe, you are such an idiot! It's not darned, it's a huge pile of—"

"—Shards," Bob finished the sentence. "Geez, Jupe, there's going to be a whole lot of trouble—really big trouble."

Jupiter, who was still standing on the chair, staring at the broken vase with a chalky white face, now raised his head, looked around in panic and stammered: "Uncle Titus and Aunt Mathilda... where are they?"

"I don't know," Bob said. "Your aunt went into the office earlier and your uncle... he's standing back there, hammering on an old cupboard. It doesn't look like he's noticed anything."

"And it must stay that way!" Jupiter climbed down from the garden chair with shaky legs. "Quick, help me pick up the shards! Come on!"

"But what for?" asked Pete. "What are you going to do? Stick them back together and hope no one notices?"

"Just help me, okay?" Jupiter hissed at him.

Pete did not dare to contradict and together with Bob, helped to pick up the shards. There were about fifteen large and thirty small ones... and a lot of tiny ones. After they had picked up all but the tiny ones, Jupiter swept away the traces on the gravel with his foot and hurried over to their trailer, eager not to be seen by either Uncle Titus or Aunt Mathilda.

The trailer was the headquarters of The Three Investigators. Actually, it was a huge mobile home trailer that they had received as a gift from Uncle Titus a long time ago. The Three Investigators had covered it with scrap metal and other junk. Since then, Headquarters could only be accessed via secret passages.

Jupiter ran to a seemingly randomly placed, man-sized old refrigerator, which was standing in the middle of the scrap metal and opened the door. Known as the Cold Gate, this was the new secret entrance to their headquarters. The fridge was empty, but the back wall could be pushed aside using a hidden mechanism. Behind it, completely buried under scrap metal, was a short dark tunnel of corrugated sheet metal that led to the main entrance of the trailer. Jupiter opened the door of the trailer, entered it and switched on the light.

"Quick!" he said, not knowing exactly why he was in such a hurry, after all, no one could see them now. He went into the back of the trailer, where another door led into their crime lab. On the table were all kinds of equipment, which Bob, the investigator in charge of records and research, used to develop photos. Jupiter unceremoniously pushed the equipment aside and spread the shards on the table. Pete and Bob also came in. Silently, they looked at the mess for a while.

"Geez, Jupe, I wouldn't want to be in your shoes," Bob said.

"Thank you for your uplifting encouragement, Bob," replied Jupiter, without turning his gaze away from the pile of broken porcelain.

Again an uncomfortable silence spread until Pete timidly asked: “You don’t really want to glue back this thing, do you, Juve?”

“Nonsense!” Jupiter turned around and trotted out of the lab. In front of the desk, he dropped into an old armchair and buried his face in his hands. “Mr Johnson will kill me,” he muttered, barely audible. “Oh, what am I saying? Aunt Mathilda will kill me! And Mr Johnson! Goodness, I never even touched that stupid vase!”

“Yes, we can see that,” said Pete quietly, plucking a small shard that had got stuck on his T-shirt. Undecidedly, he turned it between his fingers and finally placed it on the desk, where Jupiter took it immediately and turned it just as undecidedly between his fingers.

“What do I do now?” Jupiter asked.

Bob and Pete exchanged a quick glance. The Three Investigators had often been in unpleasant, even life-threatening situations, but Jupiter had always kept a cool head. So it was all the more disturbing to see him now so desperate.

“Now say something!” Jupiter muttered.

“Well, Juve, I’m afraid there’s not much you can do,” Bob said. “The vase is broken. You’ll have to tell Mr Johnson that, I guess.”

“You have not met him. He made the impression that his Heather would only marry him if she found this white dragon vase! If I tell him the thing is broken, he’ll either kill me—or himself.”

“What if you offered him something else from your china stock instead?” Pete asked. “A similar vase, perhaps, that his girlfriend might like as well?”

Jupiter looked at the Second Investigator for a moment as if something was not quite right in his head... but then his face lit up. “Of course, Pete, that’s the idea! We’ll get a replacement!”

“Wait a minute, Juve, didn’t you tell us that this Chinese dragon thing is like... rare or something?” Pete wondered.

“White dragon on a blue background, yes,” replied Jupiter. “Normally it is the other way round... at least that’s what Mr Johnson claimed. But my goodness, how rare can it be?”

“Rare enough that his girlfriend, who is a collector, has been looking for it for years,” Bob said.

“True,” Juve agreed. “We only have a good twenty-four hours. For this, we have the unbeatable advantage of experience on our side.”

“Wait a minute,” Pete stopped the First Investigator. “What is this ‘we’ and ‘experience’ are you talking about? First of all, what do we have to do with Chinese vases? Second, what do I have to do with Chinese vases in particular?”

“So far, nothing... but it cannot be denied that as investigators, we have often had to track down objects that are missing. And you have to admit that we do have a certain amount of experience at that.”

“The vase isn’t missing, it’s broken,” Pete argued.

“Don’t make it so complicated, Pete,” Juve explained. “We need a Chinese vase with a white dragon on a blue background. It doesn’t even have to be exactly the same as a very similar one would do. I don’t think Mr Johnson would notice the difference, after all, he is not the collector, but his girlfriend. And his girlfriend doesn’t even know about the vase yet, so she shouldn’t notice the deception any further. Since the vase is not even particularly valuable, according to Johnson, but rather difficult to find, we have no financial problem. We just have to find one. And we’ll have it by tomorrow.”

“Here in the salvage yard?” Pete wondered.

"No, not here. I'm sure we don't have a vase of this kind here, else Aunt Mathilda would have noticed it immediately. We must look elsewhere."

"And where would that be?" Pete continued.

"Everywhere."

"Jupe," Bob said. "I hate to put a damper on your enthusiasm, but isn't this... cheating?"

Jupiter sighed heavily and stood up. "Bob," he said calmly. "It would be cheating if we were to enrich ourselves in any way—but we are not doing that. We are only preventing the worst—namely that my head will be ripped off. If we find a substitute vase, everything will be fine. No one will be hurt, no one will notice the difference, and everything will be fine."

Bob cleared his throat. "Okay... whatever you say."

"Does that mean that this afternoon at the beach is cancelled again?" Pete asked, annoyed.

"That is what it means, I'm afraid," Jupiter replied. "After all, we have a new case to work on."

"A case?" Pete said. "Well... I wouldn't exactly call this a case."

"A case is a case as soon as the client describes it as such," claimed Jupiter. "And we are not allowed to reject it, as our motto forbids that."

"I know our motto," growled Pete. "But you're forgetting one crucial point—we don't have a client, so we have no case either."

"Yes," contradicted Jupiter. "The client is me... and now we have wasted enough time. It's five in the afternoon. We still have a few hours to go round the antique dealers and china shops in the area. It's best to take the back exit so that we don't run into Aunt Mathilda at the office. She might have some work for us after all and won't let us go. Let's go, fellas!"

"Wait, Jupe, our bikes are still in the yard," Bob said. "We have to go and get them."

"All right, Bob. I'll go get my bike and meet you two. Then we have to leave quietly."

They left the headquarters the same way they had come, and were again standing in the warm afternoon sun. Bob's and Pete's bikes were parked right in front of the unfortunate shelf. The moment Jupiter joined them there, Aunt Mathilda suddenly appeared, walking towards them. She beamed at The Three Investigators in a good mood. "Well, boys, off to the beach?"

"Uh... yes," Jupiter replied uncertainly. His eyes flickered to where the vase had stood earlier and now there was a huge gap.

"That's right, have a nice day in this beautiful weather! There is not much going on here today. Tell me, Jupe..."

"Here it comes," Jupiter thought and swallowed. "Yes, Aunt Mathilda?"

"I asked you to sort the records. You can stop that for now as I have a more important job for you." She pointed at something tiny on the ground below the shelf.

Jupiter could not see anything. "What is that?"

"This is mouse poo! And the whole shelf is full of it! I wanted to clean it because it was so embarrassing when Mr Johnson was here earlier. His sleeves got all dirty, did you see that? The crockery haven't been cleaned in years—that's bad. Anyway, I'm just getting started, and what do I see? Mouse droppings! All over the place! This is really going too far. I have nothing against mice, but they should be somewhere else, not here in the salvage yard. I'm gonna get rid of those critters."

"Uh-huh."

"In one of the old chests of drawers over there is a box of mousetraps. It would be nice if you could put them up tonight!"

"Is there at least some other way to catch the mice alive?" Jupiter asked.

“Alive?” Aunt Mathilda laughed. “What a newfangled fad! They are mice, Jupe, not an endangered species!”

“I just feel sorry for the critters.”

“You should have pity on us! Because if this plague of mice continues, we can soon close shop as nobody will come anymore. Who wants to have mouse droppings in their coffee cups they just bought from us! So, Jupe, be so kind and set the traps!”

“I will,” Jupiter promised and took off.

When The Three Investigators were out of earshot, Bob whispered: “I thought your aunt had noticed something missing. You were lucky.”

They were pushing their bikes towards the front gate when Aunt Mathilda called them back: “Jupe! Wait a minute!”

For a moment, the First Investigator considered pretending not to have heard her, but then he returned to his aunt with a beating heart. “Yes, Aunt Mathilda?”

Mathilda Jones pointed to the empty space on the top shelf and looked piercingly at Jupiter. “Say, what happened to Mr Johnson’s vase?”

3. In Search of a Ming Vase

Jupiter swallowed. "The... uh, what?"

"The vase, Jupe!" Aunt Mathilda exclaimed. "The vase that the nice gentleman brought by just twenty minutes ago! It is gone!"

"Oh, yes, of course, the vase!" Jupiter replied and thought feverishly. "I have taken it to a safe place."

"Safe? What does that mean?"

"It's at our headquarters. We thought that it was... well, that it might be a bit wobbly up there, and if it gets windy tonight, maybe it'll be blown down."

Aunt Mathilda frowned and looked first at the cloudless sky and then at a tree by the road whose leaves did not move. "It would have to be very windy then!"

"Or a stray cat climbs onto the shelf and knocks it down! Could be possible... with all those mice around. You never know, do you?" Jupe added. "And this is so important to Mr Johnson that I thought..." He fell silent.

"You thought you couldn't imagine if the vase broke," Aunt Mathilda helped him out.

"Yeah... right."

"You're right about that, though. That would be terrible! The things this man does for his fiancée, oh, that would warm your heart. I would never forgive myself if the vase was damaged here in our yard."

"You see—my thoughts exactly. That's why I kept it safe."

"I understand," Aunt Mathilda said. "Jupe, I must say that I find it very commendable that you care so much about the private happiness of your fellow human beings. Lately I sometimes had a feeling that you no longer bother about such things... that you were only busy with your... detective stuff and all that, but I guess I was wrong. You really are turning into a responsible, supportive young man. I'm very proud of you."

Jupiter swallowed hard. "I have to go."

"Yes, yes, of course, see you later then! Have fun!"

Jupiter turned and ran back to Bob and Pete. Together they left the salvage yard.

"So?" Pete asked curiously. "Did she suspect anything?"

Jupiter shook his head wordlessly. He could not speak. A thick lump was sitting in his throat and he had the feeling that this lump was getting bigger and bigger.

"Everything's fine," he finally brought out, croaking.

But neither Bob nor Pete believed him.

Their first destination was Santa Monica. Bob had remembered that there were a few shops near the promenade which sold not only souvenirs and tourist items, but also offered handicrafts and antiques here and there.

They entered a small shop that reminded them a lot of the salvage yard as the shop was stuffed to the ceiling with junk, and the shelves and cupboards were so close together that the First Investigator had trouble turning around without dragging something down.

A small, chubby woman came towards them. She was much fatter than Jupiter and moved through the chaos with somnambulistic certainty. "Good afternoon, what can I do for

you?”

“We are looking for a Chinese vase,” Bob said. “With a dragon motif.”

“You’re in luck, boys. That’s what I got. Wait!” She squeezed herself between a crammed open cupboard and a shaky table so cluttered that her legs bent menacingly to one side, and fished something out of a dusty corner.

It was a Chinese vase... and it had a dragon pattern. Unfortunately, it did not show a large white dragon on a blue background, but eight small blue dragons on a white background. And the vase was just half the size of the one they were looking for. Bob shook his head regretfully.

“Well, I’m sorry, I don’t have another one,” the woman said, “but if I may give you a tip—try Rocky Beach! There’s a big junk shop, well, actually more like a junkyard than a shop, and the owner is a bit eccentric, but you can find anything you can imagine there!”

“Thank you,” Bob said and threw an uncertain look at Jupiter. “We’ll remember that.”

The second shop where they ended up offered almost exclusively old porcelain and silver cutlery. The selection of vases was not large, but there were three Chinese ones. They had the wrong shape, the wrong size, the wrong colour and the wrong motif, namely lotus blossoms instead of dragons.

When Jupiter asked if there were any more, the nice saleswoman suggested: “Try The Jones Salvage Yard in Rocky Beach! My aunt always goes there when she’s looking for something. They have almost only junk, but sometimes you can find some really nice things.”

Jupiter cleared his throat. “Uh yes, I know where that is!” he said, playing friendly. “Pretty chaotic there, isn’t it?”

The saleswoman nodded.

“And the guy who owns this place is kind of a nut job, right?”

“Yes, that’s the one!” she agreed happily.

“He has been piling up useless junk around there for years, and getting excited about the ugliest rubbish you can imagine.” Jupiter laughed.

The saleswoman laughed too. “Yes, yes, you could say that.”

“I know that place very well,” Jupiter said and got serious. “It belongs to my uncle.”

Next, The Three Investigators headed for Burns Antique Market, a shop that was well above their price range. The windows, which were made of safety glass, as Pete discovered, displayed gold watches and jewellery, and none of the items were for less than four hundred dollars. But Bob remembered having seen Chinese vases there before. “It doesn’t cost anything to ask,” he said.

When The Three Investigators entered the shop, they were met by the smell of old upholstery and wood polish. The ringing of the small brass bell above the door drew Mr Burns, an elderly gentleman in an impeccably white and freshly ironed shirt, out of a back room. Suspiciously, he gazed at the three boys over the edge of his narrow glasses and retreated behind the counter, probably to stay within reach of his alarm button, as Jupiter suspected.

“Good afternoon,” said the First Investigator politely. “We are looking for a Chinese vase—about this big, decorated with a white dragon on a blue background.”

Mr Burns raised his eyebrows in surprise and relaxed a little. “Interesting,” he said. “May I ask where you got your interest in such a vase?”

"I broke one and now I need a replacement before my aunt notices anything," Jupiter replied straight away.

"I understand. This is... awkward."

"Indeed."

"What did you say the vase had to look like?"

Jupiter described it again and as detailed as he could.

"Most astonishing," said Mr Burns. "I have no such vase here, but I have seen one recently that comes very, very close to your description."

"Really?" cried Jupiter excitedly. "Where?"

"I only saw photos of the vase from someone who offered to sell it to me. However..." Mr Burns smiled regretfully. "However, that won't do you much good, because from my initial judgement, that piece was a real Ming vase... from the Xuande period to be precise—almost six hundred years old and absolutely valuable."

"Ming? Xuande?" Pete asked without understanding.

"Xuande was a Chinese emperor in the Ming Dynasty," Jupiter explained. "Fourteen hundred something, if I'm not mistaken. Chinese porcelain was almost always made for the imperial palaces, and it was during the Ming Dynasty that this craft experienced its first heyday. At that time, only the Chinese knew the secret of porcelain-making. Hundreds of thousands of vases, plates and bowls were made in those days, which is why many of them still exist today."

"In the case of a vase with a dragon motif, it can even be assumed that it was actually intended for the emperor himself," continued Mr Burns, whose doubts about the integrity of The Three Investigators had apparently evaporated by Jupiter's little talk. "In Chinese culture, the dragon is a symbol of luck, power—and the emperor. The uniqueness of a genuine Ming vase makes it very valuable, of course."

"How valuable?" Pete looked it up.

Mr Burns thought for a moment. "The one I was offered, I would estimate at least twenty thousand dollars, perhaps more, if anything."

Jupiter, Bob and Pete audibly gasped for breath.

"Twenty thousand dollars! Well, that would have settled it," said Bob. "We had thought of a slightly cheaper option. It doesn't have to be a real Ming vase. It only has to look like one."

"I'm really very sorry, boys... but I only deal in... items of certain values. Even that, that particular vase that I mentioned was a bit on the high side for me to resell it."

The Three Investigators thanked Mr Burns and said goodbye.

As they were about to leave the shop, Mr Burns thought of something else. "If you're looking for a cheaper alternative, why not try—"

Jupiter twisted his eyes. "Now if you want to recommend to me that strange junkyard operated by a weirdo in Rocky Beach, that's my uncle."

Mr Burns shook his head in confusion. "No, I was actually talking about Chinatown."

4. Prince Valiant

“Chinatown,” Bob moaned after they had left the shop. “Of course! There are loads of shops with Chinese stuff! We could have thought of that ourselves! Shall we go there now?”

Jupiter pulled a face. “Too far. It will take us at least two hours to get there by bike!”

“You need two hours,” Pete corrected. “Bob and I can do it in one.”

“Fine. Go ahead, then. I’ll cycle back to Rocky Beach, grab your car and catch up with you.”

They finally agreed to ride back together as Pete did not want to let the First Investigator drive his MG.

Half an hour later, they reached the salvage yard. In the meantime, dusk had set in and Aunt Mathilda was already sitting in the office doing the daily accounts. When she saw The Three Investigators rolling through the driveway, she briefly stood up and called out: “Jupe, would you please close the gate right away? We are closing for the day!”

“Sure, Aunt Mathilda!” Jupiter parked his bike and sighed heavily. “I flinch every time Aunt Mathilda calls for me. All the time I think that she has found out what happened. Goodness, what will I do if we don’t find a replacement?”

“You could still emigrate to Europe,” joked Bob.

“Or to China,” Pete remarked.

“Ha ha, very funny.”

They strolled back to the entrance and closed the heavy wrought-iron gate. Jupiter was turning the key around in the lock when a shabby-looking red Chevrolet stopped at the road. A man got out and walked purposefully towards the gate. He was small and a bit stocky, wearing a threadbare black suit. The strangest thing was his Prince Valiant hairdo, which almost looked like a toupee.

“Wait!” he shouted, and went into a run that made him gasp after only a few metres.

“Sorry, we are closed,” Jupiter replied. He knew that Aunt Mathilda hated it when customers came while she was finalizing the daily accounts.

“Closed? Oh, that’s very unfortunate. I drove all the way from Oxnard to...” He squinted at the sign by the road. “... to visit The Jones Salvage Yard.”

“As I said, I’m very sorry about this, but—” Jupiter repeated.

“It wouldn’t take long!” the man protested.

Jupiter wrestled with himself for a moment. “Are you looking for anything in particular?”

“Yes. I collect old Chinese vases. And you surely have something like that, don’t you?”

Jupiter’s reaction was more of a reflex. He had been so afraid in the last few hours that Aunt Mathilda or Uncle Titus would catch on to him that he automatically said: “No, I’m afraid we don’t have anything like that.” His heartbeat only quickened after he had responded.

“Are you sure?” The man looked it up suspiciously.

“Yes. I work here.”

The endeavoured friendliness of the customer had evaporated when he said: “May I speak to your boss?”

“My boss is my uncle, and I hardly think he will tell you anything else,” Jupiter replied sourly. “Nevertheless, I would like—”

“Jupe!” cried Uncle Titus from somewhere, and Jupiter turned around.

“Is there a problem?” Titus asked.

“Uh no, actually—”

“Are you Mr Jones?” cried the man with the Prince Valiant hairdo through the gate grille.

“That’s me!” Uncle Titus came closer, inconspicuously followed by Bob and Pete, who had only just realized that something was going on. Finally, they were all standing next to the First Investigator.

“What is it?” Uncle Titus asked the man.

Prince Valiant cleared his throat. “Your nephew was about to slam the gate in my face —”

“That’s not true!” Jupe said.

“Anyway, I just want to have a quick look around,” he continued a bit more friendly, “for a Chinese vase, to be exact. That is surely possible, isn’t it?”

Pete audibly sucked in the air, for which he received an inconspicuous bump from Bob, but Uncle Titus remained calm in person. “I’m sorry, but we don’t have Chinese vases in stock at the moment.”

“Excuse me?”

“But every now and then, something turns up. If you leave me your phone number, I could call you as soon as I find a vase.”

“Listen to me, my good man!” Prince Valiant’s façade of civility collapsed a second time. “Are you pulling my leg? I happen to know you have a Chinese vase!”

Uncle Titus laughed as if all this amused him more than it annoyed him. “No really, I’m sorry, you’ve been misinformed. You are welcome to convince yourself of that.”

“Yes, I’d love to!”

“Tomorrow morning from ten o’clock when we open. Goodbye!” Without waiting for an answer, Uncle Titus turned around and strolled away as calmly as he had come. The Three Investigators followed him.

“That was great, Uncle Titus!” Jupiter praised his uncle, when the bewildered Prince Valiant was out of earshot.

“A very unpleasant person. If he does indeed turn up again tomorrow, I’ll show him some shopworn items. In any case, he won’t see the vase. Strange that he asked for it of all things. Another customer must have discovered it and told him about it.” He took a look at the freshly dusted shelf with the crockery items and paused. “Where is it, anyway?”

“What?”

“The vase. It is no longer in its place.”

“Oh, yes, we’ve taken it to our trailer...” Jupiter replied and immediately felt the lump in his throat again. “To prevent other people taking it.”

“I see,” Uncle Titus said. “Very well. But tomorrow it must be back in its place. You know that, don’t you?”

“Yes, of course.”

“Good. I’m going to get back to my lawn chairs.” Uncle Titus went away.

“Strange,” Pete muttered after Jupiter’s uncle was out of earshot.

“Very odd...” Bob agreed. “Is this a coincidence, Jupe?”

“Hard to say,” murmured the First Investigator. “But we don’t have time to deal with this mystery right now. We have to find a vase with a white dragon on a blue background! I have an idea—you two go to Chinatown and search the shops there. Meanwhile, I’m going to

search the Internet. You know—online shops, auctions and so on. Maybe I'll find something there somewhere.”

“Hmm...” mumbled Bob. “Wouldn't it be better if you went to Chinatown yourself? You are the only one of us who has seen that vase for more than five seconds—in its intact state, I mean. I don't think Pete and I remember the thing well enough to find a replacement.”

“I don't mind. Then Pete and I will go,” Jupe agreed. “You take care of the Internet search.”

“Isn't that completely useless?” Pete asked. “Even if Bob finds something, there's hardly enough time until tomorrow afternoon to order something and have it sent here.”

“We must leave no stone unturned,” said Jupiter. “And now let's go. There is no time to lose!”

Jupiter and Pete had been on the road for over four hours, and it was pitch dark outside when Bob Andrews let himself fall back on his chair and tiredly rubbed his eyes. He had now stared at the screen for hours and looked at hundreds of Chinese vases on the Internet.

In the meantime, he no longer knew exactly what the design was supposed to look like. Too many pictures had meanwhile clouded his memory of the original vase. Although he had found two or three items with a white dragon in the last few hours, they were of no use to them at all because they were all genuine Ming vases and were either in museums somewhere in the world or were offered by antique dealers for astronomically high prices.

It was desperate, but Bob wanted to keep searching at least until Jupiter and Pete were back. Tired, he clicked on the next link. He didn't even bother to read the text on the page any more, so he just skimmed through the photos.

Suddenly he sat up straight. A vase had appeared on the screen that looked exactly like the one Jupiter had broken—the colour, shape and motif were exactly right, at least as far as Bob could remember. That was it!

Bob was about to take one of the shards from the lab to compare the design of the dragon when he heard a noise coming from outside. That must have been Jupe and Pete! Excited, Bob jumped to the door leading out into the open-air workshop and tore it open. “Jupe, I think I've found it!” But there was nobody at all in the open-air workshop.

“Strange,” Bob murmured and closed the door. Then he went to the ‘See-All’ periscope which was a construction of stove pipes and mirrors that protruded from the roof of the trailer. It could be turned around to allow him to watch everything that went on at the salvage yard. Bob squinted his eyes together to look around the salvage yard, but everything was quiet and deserted. Had he been mistaken?

Bob was about to turn away when he suddenly saw a crouching shadow scurrying through the yard! It was a large, slender shadow that did not resemble Jupiter or Pete.

“A burglar!” Bob whispered to himself. The shadow moved out of the periscope's field of vision. As Bob turned the stove pipe to follow the intruder, an unpleasant squeak sounded. Bob paused in horror, and so did the intruder who had also heard the squeaking and was now trying to locate the source of the sound. He was standing in the dim yellowish light of a street lamp that protruded above the wooden fence.

Bob could catch a glimpse of the intruder's face. He was no stranger. Bob's fear suddenly turned to anger. “I don't believe it!”

Without hesitation, he reached for the telephone. Had Jupiter and Pete been here, they might have taken on that guy together, but Bob on his own, preferred to play it safe.

“Rocky Beach Police Department...”

“Good evening, this is Bob Andrews. There is an intruder on the premises of The Jones Salvage Yard. Please send someone over immediately.”

“What is your name?” asked the man at the other end.

“Bob Andrews,” Bob repeated, annoyed.

“Are you in immediate danger?”

“No, but that doesn’t mean you can take your time!”

“We’ll send a patrol car over,” the policeman promised.

“Thank you,” Bob replied succinctly and hung up.

So the police were on their way. It wouldn’t be long before they were here. Maybe Bob should go outside. That way he could take care of the guy in case he attempted to run away.

He carefully opened the door and crept through the corrugated iron tunnel to the Cold Gate. The refrigerator did him the favour of not squeaking. Silently, he stepped out into the cool night air and stood still for a while until his eyes got used to the dark. Then he crept to the place where he had last seen the intruder... but he was no longer there.

Bob couldn’t find the intruder anywhere. Following a spontaneous intuition, he sneaked over to the shelf where the crockery items were kept. And indeed—there the figure stood, with his back to him, apparently searching the shelf for something specific.

Bob did not want to intervene, but just observe. If he could get just a few more steps closer...

Suddenly a small, dark shadow jumped out of a pile of empty cardboard boxes and hissed into the night.

A cat! Bob was so startled that he took a step to the side. He stumbled over a car tyre lying around. For a second, he tried desperately to keep his balance. Then he fell down, taking with him an old vacuum cleaner pipe, a floor lamp and two metal buckets that rattled deafeningly loudly.

5. A Trace at Last

“All in vain,” complained Pete as they passed the Rocky Beach city limit sign. “All this running through Chinatown—man, that was annoying! And what was the result? Nothing at all!”

Jupiter and Pete had walked for two hours through the streets of Chinatown and the situation got worse and worse. They had searched all the shops in the area, and even if they had missed out any, it didn’t make any difference. They had also found out that almost all of vases were supplied by the same manufacturers and that they could only buy in bulk there. Vases, yes, in large quantities, also some with dragons, but hardly any of them even looked like Mr Johnson’s vase... and those that did were made of plastic. The whole situation was so heavy in Jupe’s stomach that he had even walked past the temptingly smelling Chinese snack stands without even feeling an appetite.

While Pete had been ranting on the return journey, Jupiter had become increasingly quiet in the passenger seat. That damn vase had been a unique piece. It was not for nothing that Mr Johnson spent months searching for it. He would kill Jupiter. Everyone would kill him. Now his hopes rested solely on Bob. If Bob hadn’t found out anything either, then perhaps he should follow his friends’ suggestion and emigrate.

“We could have saved ourselves the whole thing,” said Pete after he parked his car at the side of the road next to the salvage yard and they both got out. “We should—hey! What’s going on?”

Jupiter looked up and suddenly there was no time left to deal with his gloomy thoughts. A dark figure jumped over the fence of the salvage yard onto the pavement!

“Pete!” the First Investigator cried and pointed to the surprised intruder who was about to run off.

The Second Investigator reacted with lightning speed. “I’ll get him!” And he sprinted after the figure.

Jupiter followed him, but only managed twenty steps when suddenly a red-blue, rotating glow illuminated the night—a police car! When the patrol spotted the running youths, the siren wailed and the car accelerated.

Jupiter didn’t have time to develop any plan at all because the police car was already next to him. On the passenger side, a policeman jumped out and rushed towards him. The man at the wheel drove after Pete, who had just turned a corner.

“Officer!” cried Jupe. “There was an intruder! He just—”

“Hands up!” the policeman yelled and pulled a gun out of his holster.

Jupiter froze and slowly raised his hands. “Sir, my name is Jupiter Jones. I live here. Behind this fence, I mean. I just saw an intruder climb over it and flee. You should be pursuing him, not me.”

“Keep your hands up,” the policeman shouted as if he hadn’t listened to Jupe at all. Jupiter noticed that he was very young. He didn’t seem to have been with the police for too long. The First Investigator sighed and put his hands a little higher.

“Look, sir... I suggest you call your superior now, Inspector Cotta. He knows me and will confirm that you are wasting your time... and mine too.”

An unsteady flicker had entered the policeman's face. "Cotta?" he repeated.

"Yes, Cotta," Jupe affirmed.

But they didn't get any further, because now Pete came around the corner. His hands were handcuffed to his back. The policeman who had been driving the car followed him. "All right, Bukowsky," he shouted across the street.

"Yes, sir!" Bukowsky yelled back over his shoulder without averting his gaze or even his weapon from Jupiter. "The suspect is... uh... uh..."

"Try 'arrested'," Jupiter suggested.

"We've got you," yelled Bukowsky.

"Jupe, could you please explain to the officer that I'm not the culprit, but the guy who got away?" Pete said.

"I tried, Pete, but unfortunately I have also been arrested, which means that nobody listens to me anyway."

From the right came a creaking sound and everyone turned their heads. At Red Gate Rover, a loose board in the fence was pushed aside, and Bob stepped out into the street.

"My goodness, it's not these two you should arrest, but the other one," he said angrily and stepped towards the group.

"And you are who?" asked the police officer.

"Bob Andrews. I called you."

It took a while, but then the misunderstanding was finally cleared up. Bukowsky lowered his gun and Pete's handcuffs were taken off. Meanwhile, Bob explained in detail what had happened. "And when I fell over, the guy naturally ran away—over the fence, and off he went."

"Well, well, of course we could not have guessed that," said Bukowsky, embarrassed.

"Of course not," growled Pete.

"Has anything been stolen?" the other policeman asked.

"I don't think so. I was watching that guy the whole time. He was looking for something, but didn't find it. He never even went near the storeroom where Mr Jones keeps his precious items."

"Can you describe the intruder?"

"Not only can I describe him, I can even tell you his name," Bob replied.

"You know him?"

Bob nodded grimly. "Better than I would like... His name is E. Skinner Norris—otherwise known as Skinny Norris."

After the police had left, The Three Investigators retreated to Headquarters for a meeting.

"Skinny Norris!" snorted Pete angrily. "We should have thought of that, shouldn't we? If something goes wrong, Skinny is usually not far away. How many times has this guy got in our way now? A hundred times? A thousand?"

"Now don't exaggerate, Pete," Jupiter tried to reassure the Second Investigator. "Skinny is a walking nuisance, that's true, but nothing bad has happened."

"Nothing bad has happened? He was snooping around here! And you let him get away with it too! Why didn't you report him, Jupe? Bob recognized him clearly."

"Honestly out of curiosity," explained Jupiter. "We have more of a chance of finding out what Skinny is up to if the police don't show up at his front door and ring his doorbell within the next five minutes. I also feel sorry for the critter—and I don't mean a mouse."

“Unfortunately, we don’t have the time to take care of Skinny at the moment. In about eighteen hours, Mr Johnson will show up here with his fiancée and by then, we must have a white dragon vase. Unfortunately our visit to Chinatown was without result. Did you at least find something, Bob?”

“Not for the first few hours, but just when Skinny showed up, I found this!” Bob turned to the computer and clicked the screen saver away.

“But that’s the vase!” Jupiter cried excitedly and pointed to the small photo which clearly showed a white dragon on a blue background. “This is exactly what it looks like!”

“What kind of website is this anyway,” Pete asked and bent over curiously. “Gossip about Hollywood stars and those who want to become them,” he noted. “This article is about actors and their collecting passions.”

Now all three read the text with the vase photo. They learned that Tom Hanks collected old typewriters, Michael Caine collected Art Nouveau and Art Deco glasses and Demi Moore collected old-fashioned evening gowns. Chinese vases, in turn, were Beverly Leung’s interest. On another photo, they could see the young actress in the middle of a pretty arrangement of vases.

“Wow, Beverly Leung!” Pete cried and tapped on the photo. “I think she’s great! Above all she looks great! And, man, she’s really got a great—”

“—Collection of vases,” Jupiter finished the sentence. “She’s a very talented young woman, I must admit. However, her vase collection interests me more than anything else at the moment. And there is the *White Dragon*—there is no doubt about it!” Jupiter looked at his friends excitedly.

“So?” Bob asked. “What good does that do for us? Do you want to call her now and ask her to sell you her Ming vase? I mean, this is Beverly Leung! Not just anybody!”

“So?” Jupiter casually crossed his arms.

“We have no idea where she lives!” Bob said.

“Yes, I do,” Jupiter said confidently. “In Bel Air, not far from here.”

“How do you know that?” Bob asked.

“It says here...” Jupe pointed to the article.

Bob skimmed the article a second time and had to agree with Jupiter. “And what are you going to do now? Visit her?”

“Yes.”

“And you really think she’s gonna let you have her vase?” Bob wondered.

“Maybe not that,” replied Jupiter. “But perhaps Miss Leung can tell us where she got it from... or where there are more of them.”

Bob had nothing more to say to that. He still thought it was a crazy idea and looked to Pete for help.

But Pete just grinned, strangely enraptured, and said: “Wow! We’re going to visit Beverly Leung. I’m beginning to like this case!”

6. Kill the Vase Breaker!

When Bob and Pete finally left Headquarters to go home, it was already after midnight. They were exhausted from this very long day, and Jupiter also went to bed immediately. But the sleep was not very restful.

In his dreams, Jupiter was plagued by the horrors of what awaited him when he failed—denounced by Mr Johnson, disinherited and disowned by Uncle Titus, and Aunt Mathilda repeated the same sentence over and over again in Jupiter's bad dreams in a voice stifled by tears: 'Jupe, how could you! I am so disappointed in you!'

At some point, Aunt Mathilda was replaced by white dragons on which little Chinese people rode and hunted him down. 'Kill the vase breaker!' they shouted and came closer and closer. They threw spears, which just missed him and hit something with a clacking sound, over and over again—until finally one of them hit him, on the head.

Jupiter woke up. For a moment, he had difficulty orientating himself. Then he saw a pebble on his pillow and knew that he was in bed.

There something clacked at the window. Jupiter straightened up. Outside it was just getting bright and apparently someone was throwing pebbles against his window. It was a little open. One of the pebbles must have flown through the gap and hit him in the head. The First Investigator picked himself up and blinked sleepily out the window.

Down outside his house, Pete and Bob stood and looked up at him.

"At last!" whispered Pete. "It's about time you woke up! Come on, get dressed, we must go!"

"We must go... where?" Jupiter asked, still dazed. "What time is it anyway?"

"Six! That's why we didn't ring the bell. I'm sure your aunt and uncle are still asleep."

"I'm still asleep!" Jupiter growled angrily. "What is it?"

"We have to go and see Beverly Leung!" Pete replied cheerfully.

"Now?"

"Yes!"

"Last night, Pete found an article about Beverly Leung in a women's magazine lying in the Crenshaws' home," Bob explained.

"And I quickly read it," Pete continued. "It said: 'Hollywood star Beverly Leung jogs every morning to keep fit'."

"Yeah, so?"

"What else? We'll wait for her! Or do you think she'll just open the door for us when we ring her door bell?"

Jupiter shook his head with a frown. "How do you even know exactly where she lives?"

"Everything is already checked," Bob casually waved aside. "So, are you coming down now?"

Jupiter twisted his eyes. "But I haven't even had breakfast yet."

"Take it in the car," Pete interrupted him. "Hurry now, we haven't been able to find out when Beverly usually gets up, but we can't miss her morning jog!"

"Probably around eleven," Jupiter growled and retreated from the window to shuffle into the bathroom.

Ten minutes later, The Three Investigators left Rocky Beach for Bel Air. The sun had risen in the meantime, but it was still sensitively cool and a light morning fog hung in the canyons as Pete's MG meandered through the mountains.

Jupiter was still grumbling, especially as Pete had the nerve to offer him a muesli bar and a packet of milk for breakfast. But the Second Investigator merely countered: "I don't think we have any time to waste, huh? The clock is ticking, remember? In about eleven hours, you'll need a Chinese vase, so don't get on my nerves!"

Jupiter remained silent until they reached Bel Air. At this early hour, there was not much going on in the residential area, where not only Beverly Leung but also many other celebrities lived. Most of the people they encountered on the street at this time of day were joggers or people walking their dogs—often whole armies of poodles, chihuahuas and Yorkshire terriers.

The house of Beverly Leung was a small villa half hidden behind a palm grove, surrounded by a high wall. Only through the bars of the entrance gate could one have a view of the richly planted grounds. Everything was quiet there.

"Probably she's still sleeping," growled Jupiter.

"Don't start that again," Bob asked. "Now that we're here, we might as well wait a while."

But Jupiter did not stop. "The whole thing is a crazy idea. She probably isn't here at all. She's probably shooting a new movie in... New York or Berlin or Ouarzazate or whatever... Or she gets up at five every morning and is already back home... Or she has spent the night with her new lover Brad Pitt or George Clooney... Or she's at Lake Como in Italy... Or maybe she has a date with Julia Roberts for breakfast in Paris, or with Jennifer Lopez for shopping in Milan, or she's shy and never leaves the house. The morning jogging thing is just a figure of speech, and in reality she gets liposuction every six months to maintain her figure, or she has a fitness trainer to whose gym she goes to in her fitness limousine, driven by her fitness chauffeur, or—"

"There she is," Pete simply interrupted him and peered out the window. "She really has a fitness trainer. How did you know that, Jupe? Could be her bodyguard though."

Beverly Leung walked towards the front gate. She had tied her straight black hair into a ponytail and made an extremely athletic impression. At her side was a tall, broad-shouldered man, who looked very tanned, very black-haired and very well-groomed. Both wore colourful running clothes and the most expensive jogging shoes Pete knew. The Second Investigator could hardly tear himself away from the sight of Beverly Leung.

"Wake up, Pete!" hissed Jupiter, who had completely dropped his bad mood. "We need you! Because you're probably the only one who can keep up with her right away. You have to engage her in a conversation!"

In the meantime, Beverly Leung had reached the gate. She stepped out into the street. The man at her side pressed a stopwatch and both ran off.

"What? Me?" Pete asked, startled.

"Well, who else? You've been waiting for that since last night! But don't mess it up! Now go after her!" Jupiter more or less pushed the Second Investigator out of the car.

Pete gave his friends one last anxious look, then ran after Beverly Leung. After only a few metres, he had caught up with her and was jogging on the wide pavement right next to her. She didn't pay any more attention to him than her companion did, and Pete didn't know what to do.

Finally, he shouted happily: "Good morning!"

Beverly Leung briefly turned her head in his direction and nodded before turning her gaze back to the front.

"Seems like a nice day, doesn't it?" Pete tried a second time.

Now she turned to him: "If you want an autograph, then say it right away, I have to concentrate on training."

"Should I take care of him, Bev?" the bodyguard or fitness trainer at her side asked in an irritatingly high-pitched voice. But she cut him off with a curt gesture and gave Pete a defiant glare.

"Oh, uh, an autograph, yes, very much... Nice of you," stammered Pete, and Beverly Leung already pulled an autograph card out of the pocket of her track jacket. "But actually I wanted to talk to you about something completely different."

She turned to her companion and said only "James," whereupon James approached the Second Investigator threateningly.

"Namely about your collection of vases," Pete hurriedly added, as he had the impression that he was completely misunderstood here. "Especially about your Ming vase!"

Beverly Leung stopped abruptly. "Pardon?"

Pete also stopped. "Your... Ming vase."

"James?" she said, without letting Pete out of her sight. "Did you bring your mobile phone? Call the police."

"The police?" cried Pete. "But I only wanted—"

"Pete? Need a hand?"

The Second Investigator turned around. His car was behind him, Bob was at the wheel and Jupiter had rolled down the window in the passenger seat.

"Yes!" Pete said quickly.

"Who are you fellows?" Beverly asked alarmed.

"Forgive the interruption, Miss Leung," Jupiter replied as he got out of the car. "But we did not know how else to contact you. If you really want to call the police, I recommend that you contact Inspector Cotta of the Rocky Beach Police Department. He knows us, but I assure you, there is no need to sound the alarm. We mean you no harm. We merely have a question for you."

Beverly Leung gave James a hand signal and he put back the phone.

"Who are you?" she repeated her question.

Jupiter wordlessly handed her one of their business cards. It said:



"Investigators?" she asked with a frown. "Aren't you a little young for that?"

"Perhaps. However, the case we are currently working on is of a more private nature, so our age really does not matter. As my friend Pete has already indicated, it is about your vase collection. We just have a few quick questions, Miss Leung, then we'll leave you alone."

“How do you know about my vase collection?” she asked suspiciously.

“We read it on the Internet,” said Bob, who had joined in the conversation.

Beverly Leung audibly gasped for air. “On the Internet? How can that be on the Internet?”

Jupiter frowned. “It was a completely unsuspecting online magazine. The journalists seem to have been in your house. But you must know that, after all there was a photo of you.”

“A photo?” Now real horror was written all over her face. “But I didn’t tell anyone except the police that my vases had been stolen!”

7. Destroyed, Shaken, Shattered

“Stolen?” repeated Jupiter. “Your vases?”

“But isn’t that what you were talking about?” Beverly wondered.

“No, actually we were talking about an article that reported on your collection,” Bob said. “We don’t know anything about a theft.”

“Oh,” Beverly Leung said, looking from one to the other, embarrassed. “Well, I guess there’s been a misunderstanding.”

“When was that?” Jupiter wouldn’t let up. “And which vases exactly were stolen? Did the police find any traces? Are there any suspects?”

“Wait a minute!” Beverly interrupted him angrily and with raised hands. “Why should I tell you this?”

“Because we are investigators and you may need our help. We could make a deal—you help us with our request and we will try to track down the thieves.”

She frowned. “It depends... specifically, what do you want?”

Jupiter cleared his throat. “This is a bit complicated. If you don’t mind, perhaps we should change the place of our conversation.”

Beverly Leung’s residence was a typical Hollywood villa—white with a red roof. The architecture was very modern with borrowings from traditional Spanish country houses.

From the inside, however, The Three Investigators were presented with a completely different picture. On the walls hung large, elongated strips of linen or rice paper on which oversized Chinese calligraphy characters were painted. There were large pictures painted with black ink with Chinese motifs, and Jupiter identified a wooden box with metal fittings standing diagonally in the corner on four legs as a Chinese wedding cabinet. On a sideboard stood a delicate Chinese tea set, and the rest of the furnishings also had something very filigree and Asian about them. But they only got a glimpse of all this, as Beverly Leung led them straight to a terracotta-tiled terrace, which warmed up tentatively just at the first rays of sunshine.

She offered them nothing to drink, but immediately demanded that Jupiter tell her the reason for their presence. Jupiter told her straight away about the destroyed vase and his dilemma. Beverly listened patiently. Every now and then James, who they still didn’t know whether he was a bodyguard, fitness trainer or just a friend, tried to interfere, but every time he was downright stopped by Beverly.

“I must say, you three are rather unusual fellows,” she remarked. “No normal person would have thought of coming to see me to look for a certain Chinese vase.”

The Three Investigators glanced at each other briefly and wondered whether this had been a hidden compliment or the opposite.

But then Beverly Leung smiled for the first time. “But I must say, you are very brave and resourceful... and maybe I would even help you, if I could. But as I said, my entire collection was stolen a fortnight ago—twenty-four Chinese vases.”

“Were they very valuable?” Bob asked.

"Most of them... but the vase you are interested in is a family heirloom. It is estimated to be worth at least thirty thousand dollars."

"How did the perpetrators proceed?" Jupiter wanted to know.

"They climbed over the fence and smashed the patio door when I was at a movie premiere."

"Not particularly original," Jupiter remarked. "Don't you have an alarm system?"

"Yes, but neither I nor the police have been able to find out why they did not trigger the alarm."

"Maybe it wasn't on?"

"Yes, it was."

"Does anyone besides you know the code to disable the system?"

"No," Beverly replied, and her sudden kindness was already fading. "But I've already told all this to the police, and I don't think the three of you can get any more out of it, do you? Besides, you're not here for that."

"True," Jupiter admitted. "It's because of a vase that looks exactly like your heirloom. Were there replicas of it?"

"Not that I know of... and I can't imagine it either. I have been involved with Chinese art for years, and I have never encountered a second vase of this kind. It is a Ming vase, you know—almost six hundred years old."

"From the Xuande period?" Jupiter asked as casually as possible.

Beverly Leung frowned. "What makes you think so?"

Jupiter shrugged his shoulders. "We also researched a bit on Chinese art," he replied vaguely.

"You're right," Beverly reluctantly admitted. "The vase does indeed date from the time of Emperor Xuande... but this knowledge will not help you or me. The vase was stolen, the police have no leads, and there's nothing more I can tell you."

"Well," said Jupiter after some hesitation. "I fear you are right." He sighed heavily.

Miss Leung looked demonstratively at the watch. "Now that that is settled, I would like to continue with my training."

Jupiter was a bit taken aback by the sudden end of the conversation, but didn't know what else he could say or ask. "Of course. Thank you very much for listening to us."

The Three Investigators rose and were quickly shown out by the actress. Beverly Leung and her companion continued their jogging, leaving The Three Investigators at a loss.

Pete was the first to say something: "Up close, she didn't look so great, did she? So unadorned... kind of ordinary."

"I am very sorry for you, Pete," Jupiter replied in a depressed mood. "But to be honest, the fact that she couldn't help us a bit more makes me uneasy. I had put all my hopes on Beverly Leung, and nothing has come out of it! This afternoon, Mr Johnson is coming and the vase is gone and there is nothing more I can do about it! There is no second *White Dragon*! It is over! I must emigrate... and now would be the best time."

Bob and Pete looked at each other. Finally Bob cleared his throat. "I don't want to make the situation worse than it already is..."

"I don't think you'll be able to," Jupe said.

"... But don't you find the accumulation of coincidences strange, Jupe?" Bob continued.

"What coincidences?"

"We have now done everything possible to find a replacement vase. In the process, we have come across two tracks—the vase offered to the antique dealer Burns in Santa Monica and the heirloom of Beverly Leung—both are sinfully expensive. At the same time, Prince

Valiant turns up at the salvage yard and also looks for a vase. And Skinny sneaks around in the middle of the night and takes a close look at the shelf with the crockery items. Something fishy is going on!"

"I agree with you there," said Jupiter. "But I have other things to do than to worry about it."

"You should catch up on that quickly," advised Bob. "Because somehow it all has to be connected, don't you think? And if that's the case, then..." Bob swallowed and remained silent with trepidation.

"Then what?" Pete followed up. "Well, come on, Bob, then what?"

"How can I put it..."

"Just say it!" Pete cried.

"I know what Bob is getting at," said Jupiter in a husky voice. "Even if we don't know the connections yet, but from this series of circumstances, it is reasonable to think that Mr Johnson had brought a genuine Ming vase to the salvage yard yesterday... That would mean that... perhaps... I have not only destroyed a romantic's dream, and possibly ruined his wedding, and shaken Aunt Mathilda's confidence beyond measure, but that I have also succeeded in destroying a unique Chinese work of art of inestimable value."

8. The Potter

“But that’s nonsense, Jupe,” said Pete while they were on their way back to Rocky Beach. “Mr Johnson is hardly likely to deposit such an expensive vase at the salvage yard! He didn’t think that thing was worth much, did he? And where would he get a real Ming vase? At most, he stole it himself. But then he would hardly bring the vase to the salvage yard and—”

“I know all that myself,” Jupiter interrupted him brusquely. “But the clues give me a bad feeling. It was bad enough before, and now, if the vase was really valuable as well...” Jupiter did not finish the sentence.

“Well, look on the bright side,” Pete said timidly as they reached the salvage yard. “It can’t get any worse now.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure,” Bob gloomily said, pointing to a red Chevrolet parked directly in front of them. “Doesn’t that car look familiar to you?”

“Prince Valiant,” said Pete. “So he accepted your uncle’s invitation and returned on time.” He looked at his watch. “Uncle Titus could have opened the gate only a few minutes ago.”

They got out and entered the salvage yard. As expected nothing was going on yet. The pick-up truck was not in its place, so Uncle Titus had probably already left for a delivery trip. Aunt Mathilda was sitting in the office. The only person who slowly roamed the yard and tried to give the impression that he just wanted to look around... was Prince Valiant.

“That’s all I needed,” Jupiter mumbled and felt a sudden rage rise within him. The reason for this was not quite clear to him, but the rage felt better than the dejection that had gripped him after their visit to Beverly Leung.

“I wonder what he’s up to,” Bob wondered.

“We’ll find out in a moment,” Jupiter said and walked towards Prince Valiant in a belligerent manner.

“Well, still looking for Chinese vases?” Jupiter asked. “Or would you like something different today?”

Prince Valiant turned around and sparkled angrily at Jupiter. He didn’t even bother with greetings. “I know for sure that there was a Chinese vase here!”

“Of course there was,” Jupiter replied calmly.

“Ha!” Valiant triumphed. “I knew it!”

“In fact, more often than not. Only at the moment, we don’t have any on offer, but I tried to explain that to you yesterday.”

Prince Valiant slowly turned red. “You’ve got to be kidding me! You know very well what I’m talking about! It’s an outrage!”

“You are rude!” Jupiter exclaimed. “Politeness seems completely alien to you.”

“Well, listen!” Valiant sparked up. “You can’t talk to me like that!”

“Why not? If you don’t like it, you have a choice,” Jupiter said and made an inviting gesture towards the gate. “You are free to leave the premises of our salvage yard at any time... or we can, of course, chat about Chinese vases for a while. You could, for example, tell me what makes you think we are hiding one from you and what is supposed to be so

important about this imaginary vase. I will do my best to meet your standards of interpersonal manners.”

“You cheeky rascal,” hissed the Prince, but before he could continue to hurl angry words at Jupiter, Aunt Mathilda approached from behind. Judging by the look on her face, she had heard the last words.

“What’s going on here?” she asked relentlessly.

“Nothing, Aunt Mathilda. The gentleman was just saying goodbye. I’m afraid he didn’t find what he was looking for.”

Immediately Prince Valiant pounced on Aunt Mathilda and tried to smile friendly. “I’m looking for a Chinese vase that looks exactly like this.” Out of nowhere, he pulled out a photo and held it under Aunt Mathilda’s nose. Jupiter took a look at it and swallowed. It was the *White Dragon*!

“Perhaps you’ve seen this before?” Valiant said.

“Of course,” replied Aunt Mathilda frankly, and Jupiter rolled his eyes. “But I’m sorry, it is already reserved for someone else.”

“Reserved?” cried the man in surprise. “That means it’s here?”

“Yes, it is.”

“Where?”

“My nephew has kept it for safety... but as I said, it is not for sale as it is already promised to another customer.”

“Could I take a look at it?”

Aunt Mathilda turned uncertainly towards her nephew. “Well, I don’t know... Jupe, could you...”

“No, I couldn’t!” Jupiter replied hastily and then he turned to Prince Valiant. “It is not for sale. One look from you won’t change that, so you can save it.”

“To whom is it promised?” continued the Prince.

“With respect, that’s none of your business,” Jupe said.

“Jupe!” admonished Aunt Mathilda. “What on earth has got into you?”

“Nothing.”

“Mrs Jones, what is in that storeroom over there?” Prince Valiant asked suddenly. “I saw that it was locked.”

“That’s where my husband keeps the more valuable items.”

“Like what?”

“Well,” Aunt Mathilda thought. “For example—”

“Aunt Mathilda!” Jupiter interrupted her emphatically. “I don’t think Uncle Titus would be thrilled if you told a complete stranger what’s in the storeroom! I rather think he would have asked him to leave at once let alone go into the storeroom!”

Aunt Mathilda looked at him half stunned, half outraged with wide eyes. “But—”

“Well, then I will take over,” Jupiter said and turned to Prince Valiant. “Please leave our property!”

Prince Valiant looked at him with a grim smile. “As you wish... I think I’ve seen enough.”

Without another word, he stomped past Jupiter and Aunt Mathilda that his hair bounced, crossed the yard, left the salvage yard and got into the red Chevrolet.

Only after he had left did Aunt Mathilda find her voice again: “Jupe, what has got into you? Who was that man? And why were you so rude to him?”

“He was here last evening and behaved impossibly,” Jupiter tried to explain. “Uncle Titus sent him away.”

Aunt Mathilda did not seem convinced.

"That's right, Mrs Jones," Bob, who had watched the whole scene from a distance with Pete, hurried to help the First Investigator. "The guy was really impertinent."

"And we can do without such customers, can't we?" added Jupiter.

"Yes, well," mumbled Aunt Mathilda. "But it was odd that he asked about Mr Johnson's vase." She squinted suspiciously. "Jupe?"

"Yes, Aunt Mathilda?"

"There's nothing wrong with the vase, is there?"

Jupiter felt a sudden heat on his face. "What about the vase?"

"I don't know. It's not in its place... I hope everything's fine." She looked at him with a penetrating look.

Jupiter felt as if Aunt Mathilda could look straight into his heart at that moment and discover all the secrets he had ever kept from her. He felt Pete and Bob standing behind him holding their breaths and swallowing hard. There was no escape anymore. He had to tell Aunt Mathilda the truth... now!

He plucked up his heart, took a deep breath and said: "To be honest..."

Aunt Mathilda's gaze passed Jupiter to the driveway. The postman just came in through the gate and waved a handful of letters.

"Oh, I have to sign something again," sighed Aunt Mathilda. Then she went to meet the postman and simply left The Three Investigators standing there.

For seconds, nobody spoke a word.

"You have to tell her, Jupe," Pete finally said.

"Yes. I will. But honestly... I'd rather do this alone."

Pete and Bob nodded understandingly. "Well, I guess we'd better go. Is there anything else we can do?"

"Yes, you can. Find out whether the vase was really antique or not, because that leaves me no peace. Try to find someone who knows about old porcelain and show him the broken pieces!"

"All right," Bob said. "I already know who could help us."

The sun was high in the sky, burning hot on the mountain road and down the dry, yellow-brown hills and valleys as Pete drove his MG up into the Santa Monica Mountains with Bob beside him.

"Poor Jupe!" Pete said abruptly. "Aunt Mathilda will probably tear his head off."

"He'll survive," Bob was sure. "He'll have to go through it now. The only thing we can do for him is to get the job done."

Bob and Pete had picked up the shards at Headquarters, put them in a box and taken them to a friend of theirs—The Potter.

Alexander Potter, who was known in Rocky Beach simply as 'The Potter', was one of the most skilled craftsmen on the West Coast. People in the region went to him to buy pots, jars and vases that he fashioned so beautifully. However, he had not been able to tell Bob and Pete anything about the shards because he only handled ceramics, not porcelain. Instead, he had referred them to a friend in Fernwood.

"Mr Grogan makes porcelain himself and is an expert in such matters," The Potter had said. "Chinese art is his area of expertise, and he can certainly help you. But do not be surprised at him. He is a bit... headstrong."

So now they were on their way to Fernwood, hoping that this Mr Grogan would know more about the shards.

A quarter of an hour later, they had reached their destination. Mr Grogan lived in a small, enchanted house just outside Fernwood in a shady canyon. The overgrown property, surrounded by a rickety garden fence, was crammed with porcelain objects, standing on wooden benches, on shelves or simply on the ground. There were bowls, dishes, vases, jugs and plates in every conceivable size, colour and shape. Some vases were almost as tall as a man, and other objects were only as big as a little finger. Many of the objects were painted white-blue and showed Chinese motives—trees, flowers, Chinese warriors and, of course, dragons.

“Wow,” Bob said, impressed. “Who knows, Pete, maybe we’ll find something here after all and be able to avert disaster.”

But before they could get a closer look at the vases, the crooked wooden door of the house creaked open and out stepped a very small, stooped man with snow-white, tangled hair and narrow glasses on his round nose. He looked like a wizened gnome from a fairy tale book.

“Let me guess,” he said in a creaky voice as he slowly walked towards them with a walking stick. “Two boys in search of a gift for their mother.”

“Uh... not quite,” Bob replied, confused. “The Potter of Rocky Beach sent us to see you, Mr Grogan. You are Mr Grogan, aren’t you?”

“Ah, The Potter!” cried the man, but Bob and Pete were not sure if it was joy that resonated in his voice. “What does he want, the old bungler?”

“Well, nothing, but he said you might be able to help us.”

“And what might that be?” Now Mr Grogan had approached them in full. He was a head smaller than Pete and looked at them over his narrow glasses with narrowed eyes.

“This,” Bob said, holding the box out to him and opening it. “We broke a vase and—”

“Bad enough,” Mr Grogan interrupted him without even looking inside the box. “And now you need a replacement, right? So that your mother won’t notice? Must have been a family heirloom, huh?”

Pete and Bob looked at each other in surprise.

“Well, actually...” Pete began, “actually we just wanted to find out how valuable the vase was. But now that you mention it, it wouldn’t be a bad idea if—”

“Not likely at all,” Grogan interrupted him. “Most of the time these things aren’t worth anything. People always think they have who-knows-what treasures they have at home, but actually it’s just worthless industrial stuff. Not a craft! Nobody appreciates them these days.” He still hadn’t looked inside the box. “Of course, I can make you a replica if you want... but it will cost a little something. There’s no such thing as a free lunch!” He laughed cackling.

Then finally he looked inside the box. “Ah, Chinese... That’s why The Potter sent you to me! He doesn’t know anything about that, the old beginner! He and his cheap clay jugs! Probably never drank from a porcelain cup, let alone made one!”

He rummaged around a bit in the shards and picked up one of the large fragments, on which a part of the white dragon was visible. He frowned and stared at the shard for a long time—so long that Pete and Bob began to wonder if he had forgotten what it was all about, but then Mr Grogan asked without looking: “Where did you get this?”

9. The Truth Comes to Light

Bob was unsure about the question. “Why, Mr Grogan? Is something wrong?”

“Where did you get this?” Grogan snapped.

“From junk,” Bob replied truthfully.

“From junk?” muttered Mr Grogan ambiguously, his gaze still fixed on the shards.

Pete and Bob looked at each other with uncertainty.

Finally, the Second Investigator asked: “Can you tell us what this vase was worth before it broke?”

“Of course I can. But it’s not that simple. I have to examine it first, and that takes time.”

Mr Grogan closed the box and tucked it under his arm. Only then did he look up at Bob and Pete again. “It’ll take even longer if you keep stealing my time!”

He turned and tried to get back into the house, but Bob stopped him. “Uh, just a minute, Mr Grogan! How long will it take?”

“A while...”

“And what did you say about a replica?” it occurred to Pete. “Could you really make a replica of the vase?”

“I just said that I could. Are you even listening to me?”

“And what would it cost?”

“That depends on how soon you need it.”

“Very quickly,” Pete replied. “In a few hours, to be precise.”

Mr Grogan moved his glasses in indignation. “What am I? A vase factory? What is it with you young people? It always has to be quick! If it takes time, it’s not worth it, is it? ‘In a few hours!’ What a nerve! Do you have any idea what you’re talking about? I have to measure these shards to know what the vase and the design looked like! Only then I can start by forming the body and let it dry! Then I have to fire it! The first firing alone takes twenty hours! Then I have to glaze it and fire it again... After that, I have to decorate and paint it. Finally, I have to fire it a third time! And all this by this afternoon, huh? Are you all right?”

“Excuse me, sir, we... we had no idea...” Bob stammered.

“I can see that!”

“How long do you need?” asked Pete humbly.

“One week! At least! At the very least! And that will cost you!”

“How much?” Bob asked.

Mr Grogan named a prize that made Pete and Bob swallow. Bob wrestled with himself. Then he said: “All right. Do it!”

“Bob!” cried Pete in horror. “Are you all right?”

“Come on, Pete, if we chip in together, it’s not that much.”

“Why should we chip in together? Is it my fault that—”

“No. But Jupe is our friend and we have to help him.” Bob turned to Mr Grogan again and said: “Please do it, Mr Grogan! And it would be nice if you could hurry because our friend is in deep trouble. And, oh yes, please call us as soon as you can tell us more about the age and value of the vase. Here is our business card, and a \$20 advance. That’s all I have at the moment.”

Mr Grogan seemed to have something to say. Apparently he didn't like taking instructions from someone much younger and much taller than himself. But whatever was on the tip of his tongue, he swallowed it, given the money.

"Now let me work, or it'll take even longer!" He turned around and shuffled back to the house, muttering incessantly: "Surely you still want to... uh... go surfing or... or smoke... or whatever you people do?"

"Thank you, Mr Grogan!" Bob yelled after him politely.

Then the old man disappeared into the house.

Right after Pete and Bob had left, Jupiter wanted to tell his aunt. But she suddenly disappeared somewhere. Jupiter searched for her in the office and everywhere in the salvage yard without success.

A quarter of an hour later, she finally reappeared. She was making her way across the yard back to the office. Jupiter summoned all his courage and walked towards her. But when she noticed him, she accelerated her pace.

"Aunt Mathilda!" Jupiter said aloud.

"I don't have any time right now, Jupe!" his aunt called without looking at him. She hurriedly entered the office and closed the door behind her.

Jupiter stood still in bewilderment. Aunt Mathilda's behaviour was more than strange. And when he thought about it, the more certain he was that there could only be one logical reason for it—she had found out about the vase, and now she was so angry with him that she didn't even want to talk to him anymore.

The lump in his throat was back, more painful than ever before, and Jupiter didn't know what to do anymore.

For the next hour, he crept around Aunt Mathilda, watching her from a distance and noticing how she avoided his presence and even his gaze. The situation was unbearable. Something had to be done.

Then, around noon, when it was quiet at the salvage yard and there was no customer to attend to, Jupiter took heart and went to his aunt. With a watering can in her hand, she was at a small herb garden she had created on the edge of the salvage yard a few weeks ago.

"Aunt Mathilda!"

She accelerated her steps. "Ah, I'm very busy right now!"

"We have to talk..." Jupiter insisted.

"Can't it wait?"

"No, it can't."

Finally she stopped and turned to her nephew. But expectedly, Jupiter saw neither anger nor disappointment in her eyes, but... uncertainty—maybe even a bit of fear. "You want to talk to me?"

"Yes... about something very important."

Aunt Mathilda's eyes flickered, then it broke out of her: "Oh, Jupe! You have found out! I'm so sorry, I should have told you right away! But I knew how important it is to you! I just didn't have the courage! Oh dear, oh dear, how can I make it up to you? Are you angry with me, Jupe? ... Jupe, say something!"

"Huh?" Jupiter mumbled and fell silent.

"Oh my goodness, you are angry with me! But it was not on purpose! It was sort of an accident."

"Say, Aunt Mathilda, I have a vague feeling that we are just talking a bit past each other. What exactly are you talking about?"

"What is it about? Your T-shirt."

"My T-shirt?"

"Your favourite T-shirt. The one with the white stripes on the sleeves. Well... actually they are pink stripes now. There was this new red jumper that I bought and I wanted to wash it before I wore it for the first time. Nowadays things are always treated with something when they are sold, and I find that very unpleasant. Anyway, I thought to myself, I hope it doesn't stain! But then I put it in the washing machine together with your T-shirt. Don't ask me why, and now... it's pink. Your T-shirt, I mean." Aunt Mathilda looked down on the floor.

Slowly it dawned on Jupiter. "And that was this morning? And since then you've been avoiding me?"

"Well, I didn't know how to tell you. It was your favourite T-shirt."

A huge stone fell from Jupiter's heart. "Aunt Mathilda, shall I be completely honest?"

His aunt nodded silently, and judging by the look on her face, she expected the worst.

"There's nothing tragic about the T-shirt."

"It's not?"

"No. Something else is tragic..."

"What?"

"I broke Mr Johnson's vase."

"You... what?"

And then Jupiter told the story from the beginning.

As soon as Bob and Pete returned, they immediately briefed Jupiter about their encounters with The Potter and Mr Grogan.

"And then we commissioned a replica from him," Bob concluded. "Cost a lot of money, but we decided to pool our resources together."

Jupiter looked moved from one to the other. "That's very nice of you."

Bob grinned over to Pete. "You see, Jupe thinks it's nice of us!"

"That's probably the least we could do," Pete replied with a played seriousness.

"I will pay you back," Jupiter promised, "when I have more money than I have now."

"Don't worry about that," Bob consoled him. "What's with you here? Does your aunt finally know the truth?"

Jupiter nodded in relief. "And she wasn't angry at all! At least not really. I wouldn't have thrown the vase down on purpose, she said... and all that mattered was that I told her what had happened."

"That's right," Pete thought. "You can rely on your aunt, Jupe, I always knew that!"

"Yes. However, the problem with Mr Johnson still exists. I highly doubt whether he'll be as understanding."

"We have to intercept him somehow," Bob said. "As soon as he shows up here with his Heather, we take him aside and explain the situation to him. He might not be too happy about that, but if we tell him about the replica that's already in the making, he'll calm down again, for sure. Then it won't be a birthday present but a wedding present for Heather. That's good too."

But everything turned out quite differently. The afternoon flowed sluggishly, without anything special happening. There was little activity, and the later it got, the more nervous

The Three Investigators became. They had gone over to keeping watch at the entrance, so as not to miss Mr Johnson. But the sun was getting lower and lower, and Mr Johnson didn't show up. And at some point, Jupiter began to hope that Johnson wouldn't show up at all, so that he didn't have to explain anything to him.

Finally Uncle Titus approached The Three Investigators, looked at his watch and shrugged his shoulders. "Well, bad luck for him. It was closing time half an hour ago." He went to the wrought-iron gate, closed it and turned the key in the lock.

Jupiter believed that everyone heard another stone falling from his heart. "He didn't come!" he whispered to Pete and Bob.

"We noticed that!" Bob whispered back and grinned.

"Do you know what that means?" Jupiter asked.

"No."

"Me neither... but one thing is certain—I have a grace period! Maybe he won't come tomorrow either... or all of next week... and then the replica will be finished. Maybe he won't even notice!"

"Don't rejoice too soon," Pete warned.

"I'm not, but I'm looking forward to something else."

"And what is that?" Bob wanted to know.

"The investigation."

"What kind of investigation?" Pete asked.

"The investigation that we're going to do about the Ming vase."

"About the Ming vase?" Pete repeated. "But why—"

"Pete!" Jupiter said reproachfully. "We know that Beverly Leung's vases were stolen, and we know that some strange things are going on here. The only reason we haven't done anything so far is because we had more urgent things to do. But thanks to Mr Grogan's help, that has been taken care of, so I suggest we go full throttle into the *White Dragon* case!"

Bob and Pete looked at each other. "Okay, after this rather boring afternoon, I don't mind," said the Second Investigator. "But where shall we start? Do we have a lead?"

"We have a whole bag full of leads... We could talk to Miss Leung again, or we could try to track down Prince Valiant... but to be honest, I'm much more interested in another lead." Jupiter smiled grimly.

"Let me guess," said Bob, and Pete also guessed what the First Investigator was getting at.

All three of them said it at once: "Skinny Norris."

10. In the House of the Enemy

Skinny had not been seen in Rocky Beach in the last months. Since he no longer lived at home, The Three Investigators initially had no idea where to find him. But that turned out to be the least of their problems.

Skinny was known among the young people of Rocky Beach like a colourful dog. Jupiter, Pete and Bob went to a few fast-food shops and ice cream parlours and asked people their own age, and soon they had the information they wanted. Skinny lived in an apartment in Little Rampart—the shabbiest residential area of Rocky Beach, which actually consisted of a few blocks of apartments and was jokingly called a real neighbourhood.

“Strange that Skinny ended up here of all places,” said Pete as they parked their bikes one street away.

“Yeah?” said Bob. “I think this neighbourhood suits him.”

“Yes, but I thought his parents had money,” Pete remarked.

“They did,” Jupe said. “But they probably didn’t give him anything. I wouldn’t either if I were them.”

“And what about the finder’s fee that Skinny collected the last time we met him? That was a lot of money!”

“I don’t want to know for sure,” Jupiter said.

The Three Investigators approached the large, gloomy brick building, which was occupied by at least thirty tenants, including Skinny Norris. Behind many windows, blue television lights flickered. Loud music was playing here and there, mixing into an unpleasant background noise on the street.

“So,” Bob said and looked up at the stone façades in bewilderment. “And where do we find Skinny now? Nobody knew the exact address.”

“We could check the intercom panel, if there is one,” Jupiter suggested.

“Or we’ll ask Rubbish-George,” Pete remembered and was already on his way to one of the courtyards to look for the tramp who lived in a small wooden shack there.

Rubbish-George was unkempt and smelly, had long yellowish-grey hair, a beard and spotted teeth. For a long time, he lived in a makeshift shack in a backyard of Little Rampart. He liked to rummage through rubbish bins, always looking for all sorts of things that people threw away that he could use. Rubbish-George was not only known all over Rocky Beach, he also knew a lot about Rocky Beach.

Bob and Jupiter waited by the road until Pete returned three minutes later. He pulled a sour face.

“What is it?” asked Bob. “Isn’t George there?”

“Yes,” growled Pete. “And of course he knew where Skinny lived. But he charged me three dollars for that information.”

“Three dollars?” Jupiter raised his eyebrows. “We could have looked at the intercom panel.”

“At first he wanted five!” Pete defended himself. “So it was a bargain, so to speak. In addition, George told me some rumours he overheard—Skinny was supposedly in Las Vegas for a while!”

“Let me guess,” Bob asked. “That’s where he gambled away his finder’s fee.”

“Exactly!” Pete could not help laughing. “That would just be like Skinny! No sooner does something good come his way than he immediately messes everything up. If he weren’t such an idiot, I would feel sorry for him.”

The Second Investigator led his friends to the second of the large blocks of apartments on the street and pointed upwards. “Third floor, second window from the right. That’s where he lives.”

“The light is on,” Jupiter noted. “So Skinny is at home.”

“What are you going to do?” Bob wanted to know. “Are you gonna confront him or something?”

“Maybe later,” Jupe decided. “First we should observe what he does. Maybe we can figure something out.”

The Three Investigators entered the building. The walls were sprayed with graffiti, some letterboxes were half torn down and many were stuffed with advertisement leaflets.

On the third floor, there was a long corridor from which several simple doors branched off. They all had one thing in common—many locks. Apparently none of the residents trusted their neighbours here. From somewhere, a loud argument of a couple reached them.

Soon they had located Skinny’s apartment. There was no name plate or bell on the door, except for a brass plate with the letter ‘S’ that had been very clumsily fixed, and the letter ‘N’ had been carved into the wood.

Pete held his ear to the door. He heard a clatter of dishes, mixed with hip-hop music. “Well, he’s definitely here and seems to be busy doing the dishes,” whispered Pete. “What now?”

“Is he alone?” asked Jupiter.

“Hard to say,” Pete replied. “The music’s too loud.”

“Hmm...” Jupiter thought. But even before he had an idea, they suddenly heard a sound behind them. A door at the end of the corridor about ten metres away, was ripped open and a young man with broad shoulders came out. The Three Investigators moved away a little from Skinny’s door and pretended that they were leaving. However, the neighbour didn’t pay any attention to them at all and stormed past them in a rage.

“That was the one who had a fight with his girlfriend,” whispered Pete. “It’s finally over now.”

“This is not the way to do it,” mumbled Jupiter. “If we keep hanging around here in the corridor, we’ll be found out soon.”

Suddenly a telephone rang. It was definitely from Skinny’s apartment. All three listened intently. Someone picked up the phone and spoke, but the music was so loud that they couldn’t hear a word.

“That’s definitely Skinny’s voice!” whispered Jupiter. “If only we could hear what he is saying.”

“I have an idea!” Pete said and left his listening post. Excitedly, he waved his friends to follow him.

“What are you up to?” Bob wanted to know, but Pete did not answer him.

He ran down to the first floor and entered the corridor, which looked the same as floors above—locked doors on the left and right, with one exception—a door near the stairs seemed to have been broken open. The police had stuck a black and yellow tape over the frame, but that too had long since been torn apart and was hanging in shreds from the wood.

“Someone must have got in here some time ago,” Bob noted.

“Yes, I noticed this earlier before we went upstairs,” Pete explained and stepped towards the door.

“What do you want in there, Pete? You’re not allowed in there!” Bob tried to hold him back.

“Oh no! The apartment is empty, you see.” Pete gave the door a light kick, and it swung squeakily inward.

Behind it, chaos spread out—an old, stained mattress lay in the corner, bottles were everywhere, cigarette butts lay on the floor and the walls were smeared. Half a dozen empty pizza boxes completed the picture, and Bob thought for a moment he saw a quick shadow scurrying away, hoping that it was a cat and not a cat-sized rat.

“Even Rubbish-George wouldn’t be comfortable here,” Bob remarked.

“I told you—nobody lives here. Come on!” Pete said.

“What are you gonna do?” Bob asked.

“I think I know,” Jupiter said and followed Pete into the apartment. “The fire escape staircase, right, Pete? You want to climb up and watch Skinny through the window!”

“Well deduced, Juve,” said Pete grinning, and he had already swung one leg out of the window to the rusty ladder scaffold.

Beneath him was a narrow alleyway where the rubbish bins of the block of apartments stood. Two or three cats were just about to go over the rubbish and flinched as the ladder squeaked above them. One by one, The Three Investigators climbed up the shaky ladder.

Pete reached the third floor first. He just took a quick look inside Skinny’s apartment. It looked almost as chaotic as the apartment on the first floor, with the difference that Skinny really lived here. He had opened the window only a gap wide, but that was enough. The music was still as loud as before, but Skinny was close enough to the window to hear him on the phone.

“For the hundredth time, I don’t know how they got on your trail!” cried Skinny furiously. “I guess it’s true what the fat boy told you—that he found out something on the Internet... Yes, I know, but they are just three wise guys. They’re always doing stuff like that... Look, it’s not my fault that the vase ended up in a junkyard. I did my job and I want my money!”

For a while, Skinny listened in silence. Then he literally exploded: “I should what? That wasn’t part of the deal! They almost got me last time! ... What do you mean, you don’t care? We had an agreement! But—” Skinny were interrupted and listened again for a while. Then he said in a voice trembling with anger: “Yes, ma’am!” and hung up in a rage.

Pete heard Skinny packing up something, but he didn’t dare to look through the window. A short time later, the music was turned off followed by the light. Then he heard the door slam shut.

“He’s gone out,” whispered Pete. “Shall we go after him?”

Jupiter thought in a flash. “You two follow him! I’m going to look inside his apartment!”

Pete and Jupiter swapped places, then Pete and Bob were already on their way down. Jupiter could still hear how they dropped off the end of the ladder, which was two metres high above the ground, and hurried to the street.

Then Jupiter turned towards the window and pushed it open. The smell of cold pizza, beer and cigarette smoke was coming towards him as he climbed awkwardly through the window and slipped over the sink which was filled with dirty dishes. Then he looked around and said to himself: “Let’s see what you’ve got to hide, Skinny Norris!”

As Bob and Pete turned the corner into the street, they just about witnessed Skinny getting into his blue sports car and starting the engine.

“Bummer!” cried Bob. “And we’re here with the bikes, which, on top of that, are two blocks away—”

But Pete didn’t hear the rest, because he had sprinted to the other side of the street to avoid being seen by Skinny and ran to the bikes.

By the time he had finally reached them, the roar of the sports car had long faded away, but Pete figured that there was a chance he could catch up. Because if he had understood the phone call correctly, he knew where Skinny was going.

He jumped on his bike and started pedalling, and indeed at the next junction, Skinny’s car was at a red light. Pete caught up, but when it turned green, Skinny made a U-turn at the intersection—and turned back! Pete turned his face away so that Skinny didn’t see him, and let the car pass him. Then he turned around and followed him back to Little Rampart.

Skinny stopped in front of his apartment building, jumped out of the car and hurried in.

“Damn it!” Pete hissed and got off his bike. In front of the building, he met Bob.

“Pete, what happened? Why are you back so soon?”

“No idea! Skinny must have forgotten something! Is Jupe still up there?”

“I guess so...” Bob said.

“They are going to run into each other!” Pete exclaimed.

The apartment was quickly explored. Skinny didn’t have much—a big pile of dirty clothes in one corner and a smaller pile of clean ones in the other, a stereo with a stack of CDs next to it, a table on which all kinds of things were lying, a creaky bed, a sparse bathroom and a kitchenette with a humming fridge.

Jupiter rummaged around a bit in the unopened mail on the table, but it was only unpaid electricity and telephone bills. He looked around for a while, opened the fridge, which was almost empty, and lifted the mattress of the bed, but there was only dirt underneath.

Then his eyes fell on a digital camera. He took it curiously and turned it on. After a few clicks, the display showed the last photos that had been taken with the camera. Jupiter looked at them with great interest—so interested that he noticed the noise at the door much too late!

11. Jupiter Sets the Traps

Jupiter, who had crouched down to look at the photos, hastily put the camera back on the table, jumped up and ran to the bathroom. Not a second too soon, because at that moment, the front door opened. Jupiter had no more time to hide behind the shower curtain. So he simply pressed himself against the wall behind the bathroom door. With his heart beating, he listened.

Skinny's heavy footsteps trampled through the apartment and Jupiter heard him curse softly: "Where's the camera!"

Jupiter's heart seemed to stop. The camera! He hadn't had time to turn it off, of course. If Skinny found it now, and he would in a few seconds, he would know that someone was here!

Jupiter feverishly went through all the possibilities he had, which were not many, and decided to flee to the front. He was just getting ready with the words that he was going to throw at Skinny when he entered the bathroom, when suddenly a siren sounded loudly and continuously from the street below. It was a car alarm system!

"What—" began Skinny, and his steps rushed straight out of his apartment. "Hey!" he shouted from the corridor to the street below. "Hey!"

Jupiter took his chance. It's now or never! He left the bathroom, went over to the table to switch off the camera, hurried to the kitchen window and climbed outside to the fire escape staircase as fast as he could. In no time at all, he set off on his descent and let himself fall the last two metres to the ground.

He scurried to the street and carefully peered around the corner. There Skinny crouched in his car with the driver's door open and just switched off the alarm. Then he looked around angrily at the culprits, but no one was in sight.

"If I catch you, you'll be in a whole lot of trouble," Skinny shouted aimlessly down the street, then returned angrily up to his apartment. Jupiter ran past the building to the place where they had parked their bikes. There he met Pete and Bob, who greeted him excitedly.

"Jupe! Did everything go well?" Pete asked.

"Yes, fortunately... but it was close. Skinny almost spotted me, but then the alarm in his car went off and—"

"That was us," Bob said proudly. "We saw Skinny going back to his apartment, and we thought that would get you in trouble."

"First-rate work, fellas!" Jupiter exclaimed.

"What was he doing back in his apartment?" Pete asked,

"He had forgotten his camera," replied Jupiter. "And imagine what I discovered on his camera!"

"We'll imagine it later," Pete interrupted him. "Now we have to go back to the salvage yard! Because if I'm not mistaken, Skinny was told on the phone to carry out a second break-in!"

They were already on their bikes and on their way back. When they reached the salvage yard, they pushed their bikes through Red Gate Rover. Shortly afterwards, Skinny's sports car rolled up and stopped at the side of the road at some distance.

“Just as I thought!” whispered Pete. “What do we do now? Should we lie in wait and catch him in the act?”

Jupiter pondered for a moment. “That would only be if we wanted the police to arrest him.”

“Great!” said Bob. “Then we should do it!”

“No,” Jupiter decided. “Skinny has just, without knowing it, given us some revealing clues in the *White Dragon* case. If we now hand him over to Inspector Cotta, it will spoil our chances to learn even more from him. First of all, we shouldn’t give him the opportunity to sneak around here. Then we can calmly plan our next steps.”

Bob and Pete were not sure if they wanted to let Skinny get away so easily, but they didn’t disagree.

Five minutes later, The Three Investigators were sitting on the verandah of the yard office with three glasses of Coke. From here, they had a good view of the whole salvage yard, and even Skinny, who was probably watching the area from the street, would soon realize that it was not a good time for a break-in as long as his arch-enemies were sitting on the verandah chatting comfortably.

“So what do we know so far?” Jupiter started the conversation, and Bob bent over his notepad that he had recorded the most important facts.

“Two weeks ago, Beverly Leung’s house was broken into and her collection of Chinese vases, including the *White Dragon* worth about thirty thousand dollars, was stolen. The alarm system is somehow bypassed, and nobody knows how.

“Yesterday, Mr Johnson showed up here with a vase that looks exactly the same as Beverly Leung’s *White Dragon*. He wants to deposit it with Uncle Titus, supposedly for his girlfriend to buy today. But neither Mr Johnson nor his friend Heather came. Instead, first Prince Valiant and then Skinny hang around here, both very obviously and, above all, very energetically searching for this very vase. This suggests that the vase was either a really valuable Ming vase or at least that Skinny and Prince Valiant believe it was.

“If we assume that it was Beverly Leung’s vase, then we could assume that both the Prince and Skinny are either involved with the thief or are the thieves themselves and somehow lost the stolen items.”

“... Through Mr Johnson,” Pete continued. “And now Valiant and Skinny want it back.”

“Right,” Jupe said. “So Mr Johnson could have hidden the vase here because they were on to him.”

“But then why didn’t he ask Uncle Titus to put the vase in a safer place, for example, in the storeroom?” Pete interjected. “At least you can lock it there. After all, he insisted on choosing a place for the vase himself and then chose one that you can’t really call hidden, can you?”

“Exactly, Pete. And to make matters worse, it was observed.”

“Observed?” Bob looked up from his notes. “By whom?”

“By Skinny,” Jupe said.

“What makes you think so?” Bob asked. “Did you see him yesterday?”

“No. But guess what I just discovered in the memory of his digital camera—photos showing Mr Johnson and the *White Dragon* with Aunt Mathilda, Uncle Titus and me... here at the salvage yard. He could only have taken them yesterday afternoon, from the street. Didn’t you see him when you got here?”

Pete and Bob shook their heads. “If we had, we would’ve told you,” Bob said.

“Then he must have been hiding. Be that as it may, the focus of the photos was clearly on the vase. So Skinny either followed Johnson or he knew he was coming and waited for him here. And then he took many photos of the vase with his camera. And in retrospect, it seems to me that Johnson was quite aware of that.” Jupiter looked round the round invitingly, but Pete and Bob were at a loss.

“And what does that mean?” asked Pete.

“Johnson was trying to lure Skinny into a lead—either a wrong one or the right one, because it could be that the two of them are working together somehow. We should not ignore this possibility.”

“What about Valiant?” Bob asked. “How does he fit into the picture?”

“He could be Skinny’s accomplice or his adversary... or neither,” Jupe surmised.

“A bit vague, don’t you think?” Pete said.

“I admit that the question of who is on which side is extremely difficult to pinpoint at the moment. But when I think about what you overheard earlier, Pete, it seems clear that we have misjudged at least one character in this game so far.”

“Man, Jupe, don’t make it so complicated!” nagged Pete. “Just tell us what you know!”

“Okay, then...” Jupe began. “The evidence suggests that Skinny was on the phone with no one other than Beverly Leung!”

Bob frowned. “With Beverly Leung? But she is the burglary victim! Why would she... It doesn’t make sense.”

“I admit I don’t have an explanation yet, but Skinny mentioned our Internet research, and at the end, he replied: ‘Yes, ma’am’... And the only woman who could be the subject of such a conversation is Beverly Leung.”

Pete shook his head in confusion. “Well, I don’t understand anything.”

“We still lack some information,” admitted the First Investigator. Then he yawned heartily. “But you know what? Tomorrow is another day to get that information. For today, we should leave it at that. It’s been a very, very long day.”

Bob and Pete immediately agreed with him and decided to go home.

Bob had already reached for his jacket when something occurred to him: “What are we going to do with Skinny? He must still be lying in wait for us to leave. Should we let the police scare him away?”

Jupiter pondered for a moment. “No, I have a better idea. He’s looking for the vase, right? Well, he won’t find it because it’s not here. So he can roam around the salvage yard all he wants for all I care.”

“You just want to let him do it?” Pete asked in surprise. “Without teaching him a lesson?”

Jupiter winked at him. “Of course I will want to teach him a lesson!” He got up and disappeared without a word.

Bob and Pete looked at each other questioningly, but before they could speculate what Jupiter was up to, he returned with a big cardboard box tucked under his arm.

“What is this?” Bob wanted to know.

Jupiter put the box on the table and opened it. It was full of brand-new mousetraps. “Aunt Mathilda asked me to put these up at the shelves. I almost forgot.” He winked at his friends, then he laughed.

Bob immediately understood what Jupiter was getting at. “Well, let’s not disappoint your aunt!”

Jupiter lay awake for almost an hour before anything happened. Then through his open bedroom window, he heard footsteps outside at the salvage yard. Shortly afterwards, there was a metal snap and a suppressed cry of pain. Then came the next snap and scream, followed by soft swearing.

After the eighth mousetrap, in which the intruder had stuck his fingers or toes into, he finally took off and Jupiter fell asleep with a grin on his face.

12. Under Suspicion

The next morning, Jupiter got up from the breakfast table with his jam sandwich in his hand and went outside to the salvage yard to check the mousetraps and see if the intruder had stolen or destroyed anything. But apart from the snapped-on traps and a few faint marks on the gravel ground where he had probably hopped around on one leg to free his toes from a mousetrap, there was nothing to suggest that The Jones Salvage Yard had had any other unwanted visitors the previous night.

“What are you doing in the salvage yard before breakfast,” Uncle Titus wanted to know after Jupiter was sitting in the kitchen again and started fussing over a large bowl of Miller’s Cornflakes.

“I was just checking to see if the mousetraps were working.”

“And?” Aunt Mathilda asked curiously. “Did they?”

Jupiter nodded and put a spoonful of cornflakes in his mouth to hide his grin.

“What are we going to do about Mr Johnson and his vase,” Aunt Mathilda recalled yesterday’s topic. “Do you think he’ll show up today?”

“We’ll see about that,” Uncle Titus replied absently, not looking up from his newspaper.

Even before Aunt Mathilda was able to reply, the three of them heard an energetic call from the salvage yard. “Mr Jones! Mr Jones, are you here? Mr Jones!”

The Jones’s two-storey house was just outside the salvage yard. There was a gate between the house and the yard. Curious, all three of them left the house and went into the yard. Outside the wrought-iron gate, which was closed today as it was Sunday, there were three police officers—two men and one woman—peering through the bars.

“The police?” Aunt Mathilda wondered and immediately gave Jupiter a penetrating look. “Jupe, you haven’t done anything wrong again, have you?”

“What do you mean ‘again’?” complained Jupiter. “You act as if the police would show up here every week!” In fact Jupiter could not remember that they had ever shown up at all—at least not without him having expected it.

“You know exactly what I mean. Pete, Bob and you... Are you in trouble again?”

“We are never in trouble, Aunt Mathilda,” Jupiter replied sourly, although that was not true at all.

Uncle Titus proceeded to walk to the gate and Aunt Mathilda and Jupiter followed him curiously.

When the policemen saw the three coming towards them, they waited patiently until Uncle Titus stood in front of them.

“Are you Mr...” The man looked at a piece of paper. “... Titus Andronicus Jones?”

“I am. And you are...”

“Sergeant O’Callaghan, Rocky Beach Police Department. Let us in!”

“We are closed on Sundays,” Uncle Titus replied.

“We are certainly not here to buy anything.” The sergeant smiled dismissively.

“Then what?”

“Mr Jones, we have a warrant to search your premises.” O’Callaghan pulled out a letter and handed it to Uncle Titus through the bars.

Titus Jones blinked confusedly and stared at the document without really reading it.

“Search warrant? I don’t understand. Why?”

“Mr Jones, you are suspected of receiving stolen goods.”

Uncle Titus gasped for breath.

“Receiving stolen goods,” repeated Aunt Mathilda in horror.

“That means accusing Uncle Titus of reselling stolen goods,” Jupiter whispered to her.

“I know what receiving stolen goods is, Jupe,” Aunt Mathilda hissed and immediately turned to Sergeant O’Callaghan: “Listen, my good man, this can only be a mix-up! My husband, a receiver? This is a joke!”

“Sorry, ma’am, it’s not that,” O’Callaghan said. “And now, can you please grant us access to your property. Otherwise, we’ll have to take other measures to do so.”

Aunt Mathilda started to protest, but Uncle Titus already unlocked the gate and let the police officers enter. O’Callaghan gave his colleagues a signal and they immediately swarmed out and inspected the salvage yard.

“Could you please explain this in more detail?” Jupiter asked after he had overcome his first horror. “Why is my uncle suspected of being a receiver?”

O’Callaghan gave Jupiter a disparaging look. “Stay out of this, kid.” Then he turned away from Uncle Titus and Jupiter. His gaze wandered over the salvage yard as if millions of stolen goods were hidden around every corner and in every cardboard box.

“Please answer my nephew’s question,” Uncle Titus demanded aloud. The tips of his moustache trembled.

“Okay,” O’Callaghan replied. “All I can say is that there was a tip-off.”

“Tip-off?” Aunt Mathilda repeated. “What kind of tip-off? When? Why? From whom?”

“I am not authorized to give any information about that,” O’Callaghan replied in a cold voice.

“What do you mean, not authorized? You can’t just come in here and...” She looked at the man and woman who had already started to open boxes and rummage through the shelves. “... And turning everything upside down!”

“Yes, we can.”

“But—”

“Leave it, Aunt Mathilda,” Jupiter whispered and put a reassuring hand on her arm. Then he said to O’Callaghan: “I suppose you report to Inspector Cotta?”

“That’s right.”

“Does the inspector know about this search?”

“No. He’s off this weekend and is out of town as far as I know. But I don’t need the inspector to arrest a receiver.”

Jupiter gritted his teeth. Cotta could have settled the matter in no time at all, but he had probably retreated to some remote area for fishing where no one could reach him.

“So you have received a tip-off that there is a trade in stolen goods here...” Jupiter tried again to elicit more information from the sergeant.

“Quite so.”

“An anonymous tip?”

“No.”

“Who is it from?”

O’Callaghan turned to him and smiled arrogantly. “As I said before, I will not comment on this... and if you keep asking me questions, you risk being charged with obstruction of police work. I’m sure some community service would do you some good, wise guy.”

Jupiter clenched his fists in his trouser pockets, but he remained silent.

“Sir!” cried the policewoman across the square. She was standing in front of Uncle Titus’s storeroom. “This storeroom is locked!”

“Very interesting. Mr Jones, would you be kind enough to unlock the door?”

Uncle Titus responded immediately and the policewoman began to search the storeroom.

“What exactly are you looking for?” Jupiter asked as casually as possible.

“Stolen goods.”

“Anything in particular?”

“No,” O’Callaghan claimed. “And if you think I was joking when I said I was going to press charges, you can take your chances!”

At that moment, Bob and Pete rolled their bicycles to the salvage yard and stopped next to Jupiter.

“What’s going on here?” Bob asked in surprise.

Jupiter told them.

“What? Uncle Titus a receiver?” cried Bob. “This is a joke!”

“Not for the sergeant,” Jupe said. “They are really rummaging through everything! There’s already one in our office, and it may only be a matter of time until—”

“Aaaargh!” The policewoman’s scream interrupted Jupiter. Shortly afterwards she ran across the square, startled, clutching the fingers of her right hand.

“—Until someone reaches into a leftover mousetrap?” Bob guessed and giggled.

“I was going to say until—”

“Mr Jones!” cried O’Callaghan. “Could you please explain what this is?” He pointed to the refrigerator, which, as if by chance, was in the middle of the pile of junk that the sergeant was inspecting.

“—Until exactly that happens,” Jupiter finished his sentence.

“Oh no,” Pete moaned, and immediately The Three Investigators were on their way to O’Callaghan.

“That’s an old fridge,” Jupiter said before Uncle Titus could attempt an explanation. “We can’t repair or sell it so we’ve left it there among the junk.”

“I can see that,” replied the sergeant, and a sinister smile crept across his face. “And what is inside it?”

“Would you trust us to tell you?” Jupiter replied unperturbed. “Since you have a warrant to search our premises, why don’t you open it and look for yourself?”

“Okay, wise guy,” murmured O’Callaghan, and his smile turned into a smug grin. “Let’s see what’s hidden in this old fridge.” He laughed as if he had made a joke and swung open the fridge door. It was empty. The trigger to open the back of the fridge was well hidden.

The trailer, which for years had been their secret base, felt strangely desecrated with the police snooping around. Had the sergeant ventured into Headquarters and discovered their investigation equipment and documents, The Three Investigators would have been hauled up for further questioning. Only Inspector Cotta could save them, but it would have wasted much time and hampered their investigations.

Five minutes later, after O’Callaghan’s colleagues had found nothing suspicious, the police withdrew. O’Callaghan looked like a beaten dog and apologized for the inconvenience.

Bob looked at the police car leaving. “The poor man... He would have been so happy to start his Sunday with a nice arrest, but we have now taken away the last joy he would have had.”

Jupiter added: “What an idiot! He really thought he’d find stolen goods hidden in the salvage yard!”

“Why is that?” Pete wanted to know.

“The police have received a tip-off. O’Callaghan would not tell me by whom, but there are not too many possibilities in my opinion... or what do you think?”

13. Mr Grogan Again

“Well, it’s clear to me,” said Pete, after they had been able to break away from Aunt Mathilda and Uncle Titus and retreat to Headquarters.

“Then let’s share your insights, Pete!” Jupiter encouraged him.

“It’s quite logical—it was Skinny! He couldn’t cope with the attack of the killer mousetraps last night and denounced Uncle Titus to the police in revenge.”

“I wouldn’t put it past him,” Bob agreed. “However, Skinny knows that in Inspector Cotta, we have a confidant in the police force. Could he have guessed that Cotta was having a weekend off? I don’t think so. So he should have expected that Cotta would take matters into his own hands, and that would have been the end of his revenge.”

“Yes, but even Cotta would have followed this up, wouldn’t he?” Pete said. “He probably would have handled it a little nicer than O’Callaghan, but still—and that’s what Skinny was after!”

“What was he after?” Bob asked.

“Well, that the police will find the *White Dragon*!” Pete was convinced. “Skinny was unsuccessful last night, of course, but he thought it was because of the darkness and mousetraps. That’s why he wanted to let the police do the dirty work today.”

“But what good would that have done for him?” Bob asked. “Even if O’Callaghan had found the *White Dragon*, the police would have taken it, not Skinny.”

“Hmm... you’re right about that,” Pete agreed.

“And why is Skinny on the phone with Beverly Leung if she is the burglary victim?” Jupiter interjected. “Is Skinny looking for the vase on her behalf? Then she must think we are the thieves.”

“Maybe she gave the police the tip-off,” Pete speculated.

“Hmm...” Jupiter began to pinch his lower lip. “It doesn’t match up front and back, fellas. I have a stupid feeling that we are on the wrong track. We have to look at the case from the beginning.”

At that moment, the telephone rang. Jupiter left his thoughts behind and switched on the loudspeaker so his friends could listen in on the conversation. Then he picked up the phone.

“The Three Investigators. Jupiter Jones speaking.”

“Yes,” said a creaky voice at the other end. “Jupiter what?”

“Jones,” repeated the First Investigator, irritated. “And you are...?”

“Grogan. Did you come by my house yesterday about the Chinese vase?”

“Uh no, those were my friends, Bob and Pete.”

“Then I want to talk to them!” Grogan barked.

Jupiter hesitated for a second, and then handed the handset to the surprised Bob.

“Hello, Mr Grogan. This is Bob Andrews,” Bob said.

“Did you come to my place yesterday about the Chinese vase?” Grogan repeated.

“Uh, yes.”

“Good. So, here’s the thing. You chaps seemed a bit weird, you know, so I didn’t tell you everything I knew at first glance. But after you were gone, I spoke to The Potter, the old

bungler. Had to go to Rocky Beach first, of course, because that hillbilly doesn't have a phone. So, The Potter said you were all right. Hard to believe, but that's the way it is."

"Uh... how nice," Bob replied hesitantly, wondering if there was anything else to come.

"Yes. That's why I'm calling."

"Nice of you. So, have you found out anything yet?"

"Found out? Ha! I knew it yesterday already! When I held that pile of broken pieces in my hands, everything was clear to me!"

"What, exactly?"

"Well, first of all, that wasn't a real Ming vase! A blind man with a cane could see that."

"Really?" Bob cried and heard Jupiter sighing loudly behind him in relief.

"Are you hard of hearing? Is it because of those ear plugs or whatever the name of those things you guys stuff in your ears all the time? I can still hear fine, yes!"

"I believe you, sir," Bob said excitedly, but at a normal volume. "So that vase wasn't real?"

"I just said that. And do you know how I recognized it right away? Well, what do you think?"

"I don't know, sir."

"Well, because I made it myself, boy!"

"Uh... what?"

"The vase, you fool! This pile of broken porcelain! That was mine! Of course the thing was still in one piece when the customer came to pick it up—and that was only three days ago!"

"You mean you made a replica of the Ming vase, and that's exactly what we brought back to you?"

"Tell me, are you always this slow on the uptake? I'm sure that comes from those music machine gadgets... or from mobile phones! The radiation will fry the brains of you young people! Nothing should surprise you anymore."

"Ask him who his customer was," Jupiter whispered to Bob.

"Uh, who gave you the assignment, Mr Grogan?"

"Well, my customer, of course!"

"And what is his name?"

"How should I know? I don't know your name either! I don't write such things down. He paid a good deposit and gave me the rest when I finished the work. I don't have to remember his name, do I?"

"No, probably not, sir, but do you remember what the man looked like?" Bob continued to probe.

"How do you suppose he looked?" Grogan barked back. Bob waited a moment longer, but Mr Grogan didn't seem to think of anything else to say on the subject.

"Ask him for the original!" whispered Jupiter.

"And the original vase?" Bob asked. "Did he have it with him?"

"The original! No! That would have surprised me very much, because that should be worth a few thousand bucks, oh, what am I saying, tens of thousands of bucks—at least, if it really is a real Ming vase. And the guy didn't look like he was swimming in money! He had photos with him! And I worked from them. Then I called him, and he picked up the replica."

"Wait a minute, you called him? Does that mean you have his phone number?"

"Of course I have his phone number. How else could I call him, huh?"

"Mr Grogan," Bob said excitedly. "You would be doing us a great favour if you could give us the phone number of your customer!"

“Whatever. I’ve got it on a piece of paper here somewhere. Hold on...”

It took Mr Grogan a staggering five minutes to find the note. During this time, he was constantly ranting and raving, and Bob feared more than once that he would hang up. But finally Grogan found the number and gave it to Bob, who eagerly jotted it down.

“Thank you very much for calling, Mr Grogan! You’ve really been a great help to us.”

“Yes, well, you’re welcome,” growled Grogan. He was probably rarely confronted with so much friendliness. “And what about the vase now? When will you pick it up? It’s just taking up space here.”

“The vase? So soon? But you said it would take at least a week!”

“Ordinarily it would! But I didn’t just make a replica the first time round... I made a few! After all, it’s a nice piece, and it sells well! And you think I’m going to start the kiln just for one vase? That’s typical! You young people don’t care how much energy you waste, do you? But it does matter, boy, it matters a lot! Sooner or later, you’ll find out for yourself, but then it’ll be too late! But I am just an old man, why should anyone listen to me!” Grogan cleared his throat and went on a bit more calmly: “So when are you going to pick this thing up?”

14. The VTD

Naturally, The Three Investigators immediately set off for Fernwood. They had scraped together their last savings and even borrowed some money from Uncle Titus to pay Mr Grogan. When they returned to Rocky Beach an hour later with a large wooden box, they knew that the item was worth their money. Only in the open-air workshop, protected from prying eyes, did they open the box and take out the *White Dragon*.

"Pretty," said Bob, who, like Pete, was able to take a closer look at it for the first time. He carefully traced the contours of the dragon on the deep blue glaze with his finger. "If I didn't know any better, I would immediately believe that the vase is six hundred years old."

"Which would prove that Mr Grogan has done a good job," said Jupiter. "And that was what finally mattered to the person who commissioned the replica—to get a vase that at first glance cannot be distinguished from the real one."

"Fair enough," said Pete. "So what are we going to do now?"

"We will replay the case in detail," said Jupiter as he put the vase back in the box and clamped it under his arm. "I have a suspicion and want to see if I am right. Come along!"

They stepped out into the midday sun and into the silence of the empty salvage yard.

"The photos on Skinny's digital camera were taken from the street through the gate," said Jupiter. "I think Skinny was hiding behind the elms across the street. I will now repeat as closely as possible to what Mr Johnson did two days ago. Pete, you take over Skinny's role and watch me do it!"

The Second Investigator left the salvage yard and got into position, as Jupiter had told him to.

Jupiter put the wooden box on the floor and took the vase out. "That's how Johnson did it," he told Bob. "At this very spot... and then he carried the vase before him like a crown at a coronation ceremony." Jupiter strutted with the vase across the yard and over to the old wooden shelf. "So? What do you think?"

"Looks pretty conspicuous," said Bob. "Are you really sure that that's how Johnson did it? Did he wiggle his butt like you did?"

"I'd like a little more enthusiasm for our investigative work, Bob."

"Excuse me," Bob said with a grin.

"Anyway, Aunt Mathilda led him to this shelf. And then Johnson insisted on putting the *White Dragon* himself."

Pete came back. "Well, you can no longer see the shelf from the street, but for everything else, I had a perfect view. It was almost as if you deliberately held the vase so that I could see it clearly, Jupe."

The First Investigator nodded slowly. "I had the same feeling. So it is quite possible that Mr Johnson knew that he was being watched by Skinny, and not only that—he even wanted to be watched, otherwise he wouldn't have acted like that."

"But I don't understand that," Pete said. "Why did he want to be watched? It doesn't make sense."

"That makes as much sense as it makes sense to place a vase on the top, barely accessible board of an extremely shaky shelf," replied Jupiter. "What makes someone want to put a vase

there of all places, when it was supposedly so important to him? The danger of it falling off was great.”

“Maybe Johnson wanted it to fall,” Bob said.

“The thought is obvious, but unfortunately it doesn’t make sense as well,” contradicted Jupiter. “After all, Mr Johnson could not have known that an accident would happen. It would have been just as likely that the vase up there would remain standing intact and gathering dust for years.”

Frowning, Jupiter looked up at the top shelf. Then he lifted the vase above his head and tried to place it where the earlier one had stood. It didn’t work, Jupiter was not tall enough.

“Let me try,” Pete said and took the vase from the First Investigator. Even Pete had to stand on tiptoes, then he just managed to push the vase onto the top shelf. It wobbled slightly, and then it stood still. “Like this,” Pete said and gave the shelf a slight push. The vase wobbled again. Jupiter and Bob spread out their arms to catch the *White Dragon* in case it fell... but nothing happened.

Pete gave the shelf a stronger push. The porcelain clanked and wobbled, but not so much that it threatened to fall off. Now Pete was jiggling the shelf. Nothing fell down. The vase, which had a certain weight because of its size, only swayed slightly.

“Strange,” mumbled Bob. “I would have bet it could happen again.”

“It’s not only strange, Bob, it’s so strange that I dare to say it’s not right,” mumbled Jupiter, pinching his lower lip. Pete pushed the shelf a few more times, without result.

“Tell me, are you out of your senses?” Mathilda Jones marched up towards The Three Investigators. “What are you doing? Do you want to break something again?”

Aunt Mathilda saw the vase and froze. Then her face pulled away in delight. “Jupe! That... that’s...”

“The vase, Aunt Mathilda, indeed!”

“But I thought you had it—”

“I did. This is a replica.” Jupiter told his aunt about Mr Grogan and his work.

Aunt Mathilda was delighted and touched. “I think that’s wonderful of you! If Mr Johnson ever shows up, he won’t know the difference! I knew I could rely on you! But still, I’d be much obliged if you could leave the shelf alone now, would you? ... Before another disaster happens... Oh, speaking of the shelf...” Aunt Mathilda broke off and rummaged in the pocket of her smock apron. “I’ve been carrying this thing around since the day before yesterday and I keep forgetting to ask you about it...” She handed him a small object. “Is this yours? I found it when I was dusting on the shelf. It looked like one of your gadgets, so I thought I’d ask you before I throw it away.”

Jupiter took the object and looked at it curiously. It was a small wooden disc, no larger than a matchbox. On it was mounted a thick spring, which could be bent back with considerable effort and attached to the edge of the disc with a tiny hook. When Jupiter tried to do this, however, the spring remained taut for only a few seconds. A careless movement by Jupiter made it slip out of its attachment and snap back with a swing.

“This is rubbish, isn’t it?” Aunt Mathilda asked.

“What? Uh, no! No, that’s mine. I... want it back. Thanks for it, Aunt Mathilda... Tell me, where exactly was it?”

“Well, up there.” She pointed to where the *White Dragon* was placed. “Well, it’s a good thing I didn’t throw it away then. One never knows with you. In the end, it’s just some piece of evidence or something.” Aunt Mathilda laughed.

“What is that?” Pete asked and took the gadget curiously in his hand. “Looks a bit like one of the mousetraps we set up, doesn’t it?” He turned it over. On the back was a wheel with

engraved numbers. Pete tried turning it a little and a soft ticking sounded. "It's like an egg timer."

Suddenly Aunt Mathilda was startled. "I'm glad you said it! I have something in the oven." And she hurried back into the house.

"It certainly looks very homemade," Bob continued. "Is this really yours, Juve?"

"No, certainly not," Jupiter replied and took the gadget back from Pete. He had quickly realized how it worked. "Look here," he said, tightened the spring, turned the timer and carefully placed the device on the ground. For a while nothing happened, except that the timer ticked almost inaudibly. Then, instead of a ringing, the hook suddenly released and the spring snapped back into its original position.

For a while, The Three Investigators stared expressionlessly at the tiny gadget at their feet. Bob was the first to break the silence: "But that's—"

"That's it, Bob!" Jupiter exclaimed.

"That's what?" Pete asked without understanding. "Well, tell me, what have you found out?"

"This here, Pete," Jupiter replied grimly, "is a VTD."

"A what?" Pete asked,

"A VTD," repeated Jupiter.

Pete frowned. "A 'Vermin Trapping Device'?"

"No."

"Whatever..." Pete said. "We don't have time to figure it out. Just tell us!"

"A VTD is a 'Vase Toppling Device'. Don't you get it, Pete? If you put this thing under the vase, then... Wait, let me show you..."

Jupiter placed a wooden board on the ground, set the VTD and placed it on the board. Then he asked Pete to take the vase down from the shelf and carefully place it on the VTD. The vase had a cavity at the bottom that was large enough for the gadget to be hidden completely underneath. The ticking was now no longer audible.

The Three Investigators waited anxiously. Nothing happened for a minute, but then the vase suddenly tipped to one side as if someone had pushed it. This time Jupiter was prepared for it and caught it cleverly before it hit the ground.

"I don't believe it!" gasped Pete. "This really works! I'll be damned!"

"Yes, isn't it?" Jupiter growled angrily. "And I doubted myself for two days even though I was absolutely sure that I hadn't touched that damn vase at all!"

"But Juve," Bob interjected, "it must have been a tremendous coincidence that you touched the shelf at the second the VTD ran out!"

"No, not necessarily," Jupiter said and repeated his experiment.

This time he set the VTD to five minutes, placed it on the board and put the vase on top of it as before. He waited about ten seconds and nothing happened. Then he wiggled the board once. Again the vase tipped to the side.

"You see, the mechanism is so sensitive that it does not need the expiring timer to trigger it, but just a small vibration of the board. You were right, Bob. So when the vase was on the shelf, it was supposed to fall down a few minutes later. I merely accelerated the inevitable by bumping into the shelf."

"But who put the VTD there?" Pete asked.

"That is perfectly clear," said Jupiter. "The only one who had the opportunity to do so, namely at the very moment when he put the vase there—Mr Johnson himself!"

"And he did all this because..." Pete timidly asked his next question.

"Well, think about it, Pete!"

“To break the vase?” Pete wondered.

“Right...” Jupe confirmed.

“And to make it look like he wasn’t to be blamed?” Bob added.

“Also correct,” Jupe said.

“But what did he want to get out of it?” Pete continued.

“He was being watched!” explained Jupiter. “By Skinny Norris... And for Skinny, it should look as if the vase would fall off the shelf and break—and not just any vase, but a real Ming vase worth thirty thousand dollars.”

The Second Investigator shook his head. “But it wasn’t a real Ming vase worth thirty thousand dollars! It was just a copy!”

Jupiter smiled with satisfaction. “Exactly...” He held up the second *White Dragon* and looked at it in the sunlight. “Just like this one.” His smile became a grin. “But what luck! No one knows this but us!”

Bob frowned. “I don’t like the tone of your voice. You are up to something, Jupe! What is it? Tell us!”

“We have solved a large part of the mystery... but by no means everything. We don’t know who Skinny works for. We do not know who Prince Valiant is. We have no idea how Beverly Leung is involved in all this... and where the real Ming vase is hidden is unfortunately also beyond our knowledge... But I have an idea how we can solve all these mysteries at once.”

“I’m really excited about that,” said Bob.

“We simply invite all suspicious individuals here... and we’ll do it today.”

Bob and Pete looked at each other in bewilderment, then they laughed.

“Oh, is it going to be that simple?” Pete asked. “And why would they come in the first place?”

“Because we have what they’re all looking for,” Jupe replied. “All we have to do is to inform them. Let’s get to work, fellas.”

15. Invitations to the Meeting

It was not easy to find the phone number of Beverly Leung, but through Pete's father, The Three Investigators managed to get contacts at several Hollywood movie studios, before they finally succeeded.

But after Jupiter had dialled the number, it wasn't Beverly Leung who answered, but James, her fitness trainer, as Jupiter immediately recognized from the strangely high-pitched voice.

"Hello, this is Jupiter Jones. I would like to speak to Miss Leung."

"She's unfortunately busy," James did not reply unkindly. "What's it all about?"

"I'd rather tell her that myself."

"She's so busy she won't answer the phone."

"Really? Well..."

"Maybe I can give her your message?"

Jupiter hesitated briefly and then said: "Yes, that would be nice. Tell her that there is news about her stolen vase collection, especially the Ming vase."

"Really? That will certainly interest her. What's the news?"

"We found the Ming vase. But it's best to come by tomorrow afternoon, the address is on our business card."

After Jupiter hung up, he turned to Bob and Pete, who were sitting next to him. "That didn't go perfectly," he confessed, "but when Miss Leung receives the message, I'm sure she will behave exactly as I expect her to."

"And what's next?" Pete asked.

"Here comes the next call. This will be more exciting."

Jupiter next dialled the number that Mr Grogan had given Bob—that of Grogan's customer. With a beating heart, he waited.

"Yes?" a male voice at the other end answered. Jupiter recognized it immediately.

"Hello, this is Paul Nelson from the telephone company," said Jupiter in a disguised voice. "Are you Mr Johnson?"

"Yes."

"I am calling regarding your landline account with us, and to tell you that you have been shortlisted to receive a 20% discount on your call charges for the next six months."

"That's nice to know," Johnson replied. "How does this come about?"

"Oh, it's our way of saying thanks to our loyal customers," Jupiter said.

"So what do I have to do then?" Johnson asked.

"Nothing much at all!" Jupe said. "You just have to accept this offer over the phone, and that is about it. But before that, I need to just ask you two simple questions to confirm that I am speaking to the right person. It is a security procedure that we need to carry out for such offers."

"It's okay with me, go ahead," Johnson agreed.

"Just state your full name and address," Jupe asked.

"Thomas Aaron Johnson," Johnson said, "and my address is 128 Main Street in Pacific Palisades."

“Alrighty!” Jupe said. “And I take it that you will accept the 20% discount offer?”

“Sure,” Johnson agreed.

“Okay, done!” Jupe said. “I have just activated the discount on your account and you will receive 20% off all call charges in your next invoice. All other terms and conditions of the phone contract remain the same.”

“Thank you!” Johnson said.

“You’re welcome,” Jupiter replied, “and have a nice day!”

Jupiter hung up and looked triumphantly at his friends. “How did I do?”

“Great, Jupe!” Pete said, genuinely impressed. “I didn’t know you knew so much about phone discounts.”

“Neither did I,” Jupe quipped.

“Anyway, we now know that it was Mr Johnson who commissioned the *White Dragon* from Mr Grogan,” said Bob. “which, to be honest, I suspected he might have been the one.”

“Me too,” said Jupiter. “The more important information we have just received is his address.”

“What are you gonna do?” Pete asked.

“I want to know where the real vase is, but Johnson won’t tell us. And we can’t assume that it’s on the kitchen table at his house either. So we have to get him to lead us to it.”

An hour later, Jupiter was alone at Headquarters. Outside, the sluggish Sunday was coming to an end. The sun cast long shadows and bathed the salvage yard in a red-golden light. Jupiter looked at his watch. It was six on the dot. He picked up the phone and pressed the redial button.

“Yes?”

This time Jupiter used his normal voice: “Mr Johnson, this is Jupiter Jones from The Jones Salvage Yard in Rocky Beach. Do you remember me?”

For a few seconds, there was silence at the other end. Then Mr Johnson replied: “Yes, I remember. You are the nephew of the owner, aren’t you? Oh, and you’re probably wondering what happened yesterday—about the vase, why my girlfriend and I didn’t come.”

“Your fiancée.”

“Yes.”

“Heather, isn’t it?”

“What? Yeah... Heather.”

“Mr Johnson, you can save your excuses. My friends and I have been checking on you. We know about the Ming vase, and about the replica. We also know where the real vase is hidden. And unless you want us to blow the whistle on you, I suggest you come to the salvage yard tonight at midnight.”

This time Mr Johnson’s silence lasted much longer. When he found his voice again, he sounded strange. “How... how do you know...”

“If you’re lucky, I’ll tell you later. So I’ll see you in six hours. Goodbye, Mr Johnson!”

Jupiter hung up and smiled happily.

Then he rubbed his hands. Now came the last call. This was the one he was most looking forward to. Grinning broadly, he dialled Skinny Norris’s number.

“Yeah?” said Skinny.

“Skinny!” Jupiter cried in a good mood. “Well, what are you up to now? Are you stalking old ladies to steal their purses? Or are you indulging in illegal gambling because you think you are more successful in it than in, say, Las Vegas?”

“Jones?” asked Skinny incredulously. “Tell me, are you crazy? How did you get my number anyway?”

“Oh, Skinny, your phone number’s not a state secret, you know.”

“Oh yes, that’s right, you are a master detective, Jones, I always forget that. Every time I ask myself—what was that rascal from the junkyard again? And then I always end up with Master Fatso and a load of rubbish.”

“Now that we have exchanged enough pleasantries, I don’t want to increase my phone bill any more than necessary, so I’ll get to the point... You have gained unauthorized access to our property, Skinny. I could turn you in for that.”

“As I said before,” Skinny replied unmoved. “You are a load of rubbish!”

“We both know it’s true,” Juve continued.

“How stupid would you be since you are not able to prove it.”

“Perhaps you are right, or perhaps you are not... You wanna take that chance, Skinny?”

“What do you want from me, Jones?”

“I want to talk to you.”

“About what?”

“You know damn well.”

“I don’t know anything.”

“About the Ming vase,” Jupiter said. “Just because you’re too stupid to find it doesn’t mean it isn’t here. You’re in a tight spot, Skinny, but that’s nothing new. But I have good news! I got a deal for you.”

“Why should I do business with you?”

“Otherwise you’ll be in big trouble—with the police, with the person you work for... the usual stuff you get into. My suggestion is this—you tell us everything we want to know, and we’ll help you get your head out of the noose in return.”

After much too long hesitation, Skinny finally said: “All right. I’ll come by tomorrow afternoon.”

“Fine,” said Jupiter.

Without another word, Skinny hung up.

16. Sharp at Midnight

Night had fallen and had shrouded the salvage yard in deep darkness. Jupiter, Pete and Bob sat in the middle of the salvage yard's storeroom and waited, shivering. "And you really think Skinny will try again tonight?" Pete asked.

"Most certainly yes," Jupiter was convinced. "I clearly let him know that we have the Ming vase, and he accepted my suggestion without a nasty word. In other words, he thinks he has set me up and hopes to find the *White Dragon* after all—here at the salvage yard, tonight."

A car slowly drove past the road. The Three Investigators listened up. But the sound disappeared soon.

"But whether Beverly Leung will come is written in the stars," Bob said. "I don't know, Jupe. Maybe your plan is not so good after all... maybe nobody will come."

"They all want the vase, Bob," Jupe said confidently, "and that's why they're all going to show up here tonight. Trust me."

It was midnight on the dot when something finally happened. A car stopped on the road. A squeaking door was opened and closed again.

"Sounds just like Johnson's rusty Mercedes," whispered Jupiter.

And indeed... Mr Johnson's slender silhouette appeared in the faint glow of a street lamp at the gate to the salvage yard.

"You stay here and cover my back! We'll do everything we talked about." Jupiter got up and walked across the yard to the gate. When Johnson saw him, he flinched slightly.

"So it's you! What do you want from me?" Johnson asked immediately.

"Why not you come in first... I want to show you something." Jupiter unlocked the gate to the salvage yard and opened it a little.

Johnson hesitated. "How do I know this is not a trap?"

"You don't know," replied Jupiter calmly. "But I think you want to know why I called you here. So, come in!"

Reluctantly Johnson entered the salvage yard and looked around in all directions. Jupiter led him to the storeroom where Uncle Titus kept his most valuable items. Inside the storeroom was darkness before Jupiter switched on the light.

"This is what I wanted to show you." He pointed to an old display case. Behind the dusty glass stood the *White Dragon*.

"But... but that's impossible!"

"Because it was supposed to be destroyed? It was, Mr Johnson. And believe me, I had two really unpleasant days about it. But what you see here is not the replica you brought to us the day before yesterday. This is the genuine Ming vase."

Mr Johnson stared at him in horror. "But..."

"Impossible again, you mean? Because the vase is safe in its hiding place in an old warehouse in Pacific Palisades? Wrong, Mr Johnson. It was there until a few hours ago. After I called you and told you that I knew where the Ming vase was, you decided to move it to a new hiding place. Unfortunately, my friends saw you do so. They followed you from your

house to that warehouse. When you left, they got in there, took out the vase and brought it here.”

Now Mr Johnson looked around him like an animal on the prowl. “What do you want from me?”

“Just a few answers. For example, I would like to know to what extent Beverly Leung is involved in the story... because I don’t quite know yet. I suspect...” But Jupiter did not get any further, because the call of a rare bird, the Red-bellied Flycatcher, echoed through the night. That was the secret call of The Three Investigators. “Excuse me, Mr Johnson, I’m afraid we have to interrupt our conversation for a moment. We have company.”

From outside came muffled calls. Something rattled. Jupiter was worried. The shouting and rattling was not part of his plan at all. He went outside.

In the pale moonlight, he saw that Pete, Bob and Skinny were involved in a scuffle.

“This guy wants to run away,” grunted Pete, but he already had Skinny in a firm grip from which he could no longer wriggle out.

“Bring him here, Pete!” whispered Jupiter.

Skinny resisted only briefly. When he finally went into Uncle Titus’s storeroom, his resistance weakened so Pete let him go.

“You!” he called out in surprise and stared at Mr Johnson.

“What?” cried Johnson almost simultaneously.

Then Skinny’s eyes fell on the vase. “What’s going on?”

“We all wonder, Skinny. That’s why you’re here,” Jupe explained.

Skinny sparkled angrily at the First Investigator. “You knew I was coming!”

“Of course I knew that, Skinny. No one in the world is as easy to figure out as you are.”

Even before anyone could react, Skinny pounced on Jupiter. He staggered backwards and bounced against the display case. Inside, the vase was shaking alarmingly.

“Look out!” Mr Johnson cried and grabbed the wavering display case. Bob and Pete immediately took care of Skinny and pulled him back.

“Slow down, Skinny!” growled Pete.

“I want to know what’s going on!” Skinny cried.

Jupiter turned to the display case, opened the door and took the vase out for safety’s sake. “You will find out soon enough, but I suggest we wait for your accomplice, Miss Beverly Leung. Then I won’t have to tell the whole story twice.”

“My accomplice?” Skinny stared at him confused. Then suddenly he started laughing. “Jones, you’ve blown a fuse for good! Accomplice! What a bunch of hogwash! For a short moment, I really thought you had something on me, but you are barking up the wrong tree, man!”

For a moment, Jupiter was too confused to reply.

Suddenly there was someone else at the door.

“He’s right,” said this someone with an irritatingly high-pitched voice.

Everyone turned around.

“The fitness trainer!” Pete cried.

“James,” said Skinny in a grave voice.

“So you’re all behind this!” Jupiter exclaimed, and suddenly a whole string of lights came on. “I could have thought of that earlier! Damn! A single word from Skinny led me astray! When he spoke to you on the phone yesterday, he said ‘ma’am’ to you. He was referring to your peculiar voice. He wanted to annoy you, and I really believed he was talking to Miss Leung.”

“You overheard me?” Skinny exploded.

"We all overheard you, Skinny," Bob confirmed.

"You disgusting little snoopers!" Skinny cried.

"What a nice little get-together," James said and let his eyes wander from one to the other. He seemed amused. "I have no idea why you two are here, Skinner and Thomas, but to be honest, I'm not interested at the moment. You're welcome to discuss it amongst yourselves once I'm gone. I'm only here for the vase, and you're gonna give it to me now, boy. Then I'll be on my way." He approached Jupiter demandingly.

"No!" said Jupiter, as he clasped the *White Dragon* tighter and stepped back until he bounced against a wardrobe.

James reached into his jacket as quick as lightning and pulled out a gun. Pete gasped in horror.

"Yes," said James. The muzzle of the gun was pointed at Jupiter.

"I don't think you really want to shoot, James," said Jupiter, trying to remain calm. "Because either you hit the vase, or you hit me and I drop the vase. In either case, the object of your desire will break. Do you want to risk that?"

James, who was now several metres away from Jupiter, stepped forward threateningly until he stood in the middle of the storeroom.

"If you come one step closer, I'm gonna drop the vase!" Jupe said.

"You wouldn't dare!" growled James.

"I do. I don't care about it. It's just a piece of porcelain... Six hundred years old, but I don't care. You do."

For a few heartbeats, nobody spoke a word. Bob and Pete watched James anxiously while they kept an eye on Mr Johnson and Skinny. Skinny, in turn, seemed to be looking for a way out, but Bob quickly blocked his way, earning him hateful looks in return. Mr Johnson still looked like an animal in the trap and was frozen in terror. And James and Jupiter stared at each other and seemed to be waiting for each other to make a mistake.

Finally James broke the silence: "What do you want?"

"Convict the whole bunch of you," Jupiter replied coolly. "But I think I have already succeeded. I didn't know who Skinny was working with, but this mystery is probably solved now."

"Skinny working with me?" James repeated in disbelief, then laughed. "I think it should be more like whom I chose to be my henchman."

"Anyway, you have deprived Beverly Leung of her collection of Chinese vases. On the night of the break-in, the alarm system did not work. I suppose that was your responsibility, wasn't it? Miss Leung thinks that she is the only one who knows the access code to the alarm system, but she was wrong. You know it too as you probably somehow found out while you were working as Beverly's fitness trainer."

James didn't answer, but stared at Jupiter.

"I interpret your silence as an agreement," Jupiter continued. "So, a fortnight ago that evening, you turned off the alarm and went to a movie premiere with Beverly Leung, while your accomplice here, the nice Mr Johnson, quietly cleared out the house and then reactivated the alarm."

"Unfortunately, it wasn't until the next day that you realized that only one of the vases was really valuable, namely when Beverly Leung alerted the police and reported everything in detail. But your accomplice, Mr Johnson, had told you something completely different! You had given Johnson the photos of the vases you had taken yourself so that he could ask a specialist about their value. And Johnson had claimed that they were all valuable... but that had been a lie. Mr Johnson had gone to a dealer in Santa Monica, Mr Burns, who confirmed

the value of the *White Dragon*. After that Johnson knew which part of the collection he was leaving to you and which he was keeping for himself.

“You suspected that Johnson had set you up, but instead of confronting him, you decided to get our good friend Skinny Norris to have Johnson watched and steal the *White Dragon*.”

“And that’s all I have to do with the whole story,” Skinny said quickly and tried to push past Bob, but Bob wouldn’t let him get away.

“So that means my theory is correct so far!” Jupiter said smiling. “Thanks, Skinny, that’s what I wanted to know... but now it’s just getting really interesting.”

Jupiter turned to Mr Johnson. “You noticed that Skinny was watching you... or maybe you knew that James would send someone after you as soon as he realized you had cheated him. So you decided to do the only thing you could—destroy the vase in front of witnesses... and it had to look like an accident. Only when James believed that the Ming vase was irretrievably destroyed would he leave you alone. You knew that. So you brought the vase here to us at the salvage yard and told us the fairy tale of your fiancée, Heather. But that was all a sham. You just wanted the vase to break, and you want it to break in front of Skinny, who was watching you closely from his hiding place behind the trees.

“This had to happen when you were no longer at the scene of the crime, because anything else would have been unbelievable. Someone who knows about the value of the vase would never accidentally knock it over. An ignorant boy in a salvage yard would. And that was how it happened. The vase was broken, and it seemed to be my fault. But we now know that you had inserted a timing device that toppled the vase.

“Unfortunately, Mr Johnson, Skinny was no longer there at the time probably because my friends Bob and Pete reached the salvage yard at that moment and Skinny feared of being discovered. So the vase shattered into a thousand pieces, but the only witnesses, Pete, Bob and I, kept it quiet. Skinny, who should have been here to witness all this, was long gone. Your plan was crippled without your knowledge.”

“What are you talking about, boy?” James exclaimed. “You are holding the vase in your hand! And it’s obviously not broken!”

“Of course. The one that broke wasn’t real.” Now Jupiter told them about Mr Grogan and the replica that Johnson had commissioned.

James first became pale with amazement, then slowly grew more and more angry. He turned to Johnson in a rage. “You traitor!”

“You’re right, James, Mr Johnson did betray you,” Jupiter said. “Unfortunately, this fact will not help you. You will both go to prison after all, as you were equally involved in the break-in at Miss Leung’s house. But what would interest me most is this—how is Prince Valiant involved in this story? Unfortunately, I have not been able to invite him to this little meeting, because I couldn’t find out who he is in time.”

“Prince who?” James asked angrily.

“That is of course not his name,” said Jupiter. “He’s the chap who is, you know... slightly rounded and with a hairstyle like... well, like Prince Valiant.”

“I think he means me,” said a voice from outside.

17. Shards Bring Luck

James spun around and pointed his gun at the man in front of him. It was Prince Valiant, and he was also holding a gun in his hand.

"Who are you?" James hissed.

"You... you don't know each other?" Bob asked confusedly and swallowed.

"No, we don't know each other," Valiant agreed, without letting James out of his sight. "And I don't attach great importance to a closer acquaintance with you either. Now, put the gun down very slowly."

"Ha!" cried James. "Why should I?"

"A gun like this is very dangerous... and you have no chance to escape anyway," Valiant said.

"I'll take you on anytime!"

"Perhaps... but I'm not alone here."

"And you think I'm gonna fall for that bluff?"

In a flash, James moved to Jupiter's side without letting Prince Valiant out of his sight. "Give me that thing, boy!"

"No. I will drop it!" Jupe exclaimed.

"Oh, yeah? I'm afraid I'll have to shoot that man there, fat boy... or maybe one of your friends. You can choose who the lucky one is! So, give me the vase now!" James had turned all red in the meantime, and a vein on his neck was throbbing. "Come on!"

"In the face of such a massive threat of violence, I will bow to your demand," Jupiter said and handed the vase out to James.

"You're making a big mistake," Prince Valiant warned.

"I don't think so." James raised his gun.

"No!" cried Pete, but then the shot was already fired.

For seconds, everyone held their breath. Then some dust trickled out of the ceiling. James had fired into the air. "That was a warning!" he cried. "The next shot hits one of you! Step aside!"

Reluctantly, Prince Valiant took a step back and gave way. James left the storeroom with the vase cramped under his arm.

Jupiter, Pete, Bob, Skinny, Mr Johnson and Prince Valiant didn't budge as James still held the gun on them as he headed backwards towards the exit of the salvage yard. Then he squeezed through the partially opened gate and disappeared into the night.

"Well," Jupiter said and waited.

Not five seconds after James was out of sight, the sirens went off in the street. The Three Investigators saw the red-blue flickering of the police cars. The angry shouting and screaming of the police echoed through the night.

"Good old Inspector Cotta," Bob said smiling. "He's always there when you need him!"

In fact, the police had been lurking in their hiding places for hours after Jupiter had finally reached the inspector in the evening and informed him about everything.

"You know Cotta?" Prince Valiant asked, astonished.

"You too?" Pete wondered.

“Indeed. He’s a colleague, so to speak,” Valiant said.

But before he could explain this in more detail, James’s voice suddenly echoed loudly over all the others: “Stop or I’ll drop the vase!”

Jupiter smiled. “The threat seems familiar. Come on, fellas, let’s see what’s going on! Keep an eye on these two.” He turned to Valiant and pointed to Skinny and Mr Johnson.

Then The Three Investigators hurried to the gate and onto the street. Just a few metres away, James was surrounded by police, led by Inspector Cotta. James was still clutching the vase.

“Ah, good of you to come!” Cotta cried and gave the three a mischievous smile. “We have a little problem here. This vase—”

“I’m going to drop it!” screamed James.

Jupiter sighed heavily. “He is not going to drop it. It is far too valuable. Just arrest him, Inspector, he’s probably just bluffing.”

“If you say so, Jupiter.” Cotta gave his colleagues a signal.

Immediately they rushed forward, grabbed James and took the gun from him. In the scuffle, James dropped the *White Dragon* on the concrete pavement. The vase shattered into a hundred pieces.

“Nooooo!” The scream was blood-curdling. The Three Investigators turned around. Behind them at the gate stood Mr Johnson, who was being held at bay by Prince Valiant, staring stunned at the pile of broken porcelain. “You maniacs! That vase... it was incredibly valuable! It was a unique work of art!” Johnson almost burst into tears.

“That wasn’t a genuine vase,” Jupiter contradicted.

Bob shook his head. “Mr Grogan has two or three more replicas of the vase.”

“But...” Johnson stammered.

“Mr Johnson,” Pete said calmly. “The real Ming vase is still in its hiding place in the warehouse. Bob and I watched you take the vase there, but we did not take it. It seemed safer there.”

“You asked me earlier if I might have set a trap for you, Mr Johnson,” Jupiter said. “I think I can tell you the truth now—yes, I did.”

“Tell me, where is Skinny?” Pete asked suddenly.

Prince Valiant flinched and looked around frantically. “He was just here with me! I led Skinny and Johnson out of the storeroom and never let them out of my sight!”

“So it seems...” Jupiter remarked.

“He can’t be far yet,” said Inspector Cotta. “My men will look for him.”

“Save yourself the trouble, Inspector,” Jupiter said. “Skinny has regrettably done nothing wrong.”

“Jupe!” cried Pete in horror. “Nothing wrong? You must be joking!”

“Afraid not, Pete. Skinny had nothing to do with the theft of the Ming vase. He was only doing a job for James, but that in itself is not a crime. What remains is trespassing on our property, but it is considered a misdemeanour at best.”

Pete was about to start a protest when suddenly someone else appeared on the street.

Aunt Mathilda stood behind them in a hastily thrown over dressing gown, with slippers on her feet and with dishevelled hair.

“Jupiter Jones! I heard a gunshot and then the police sirens! Could you please explain to me what all this means? Mr Johnson! What are you doing here? You’re not thinking of shopping here tonight with your fiancée, are you? Goodness, is that the vase on the pavement? Inspector! What are you doing here? If I’d known, I would have dressed

differently. I..." Aunt Mathilda looked helplessly at Jupiter. "Jupe! Come on, tell me! What is going on?"

Laughing, Jupiter put his arm around his aunt's shoulder. "Everything is in good order, Aunt Mathilda, believe me!"

"In good order? Inspector, please tell me, what am I doing wrong with my nephew when he calls this 'in good order'?"

"Nothing at all, Mrs Jones, I'm sure. But if I may make a suggestion—send him to bed without dessert. That might help."

18. Inspector Cotta's Visit

The next day, Inspector Cotta returned to the salvage yard to meet The Three Investigators.

"We searched Mr Johnson's home and hiding places and came across not only the Ming vase but also part of the rest of the collection. The vases are already on their way back to Beverly Leung, and I am sure the other pieces James had taken will turn up."

Jupiter nodded contentedly.

"What is the secret of Prince Valiant?" Bob wanted to know. "Who is he?"

"'Prince Valiant', as you call him, Bob, is actually Daniel Baker and he is a detective. He specializes in tracing stolen art objects when they are offered on the art market. Mr Burns, the antique dealer in Santa Monica, is unfortunately confronted with stolen goods more often in his work, which is why he has been working with Mr Baker for years."

"Now I understand!" cried Jupiter. "Mr Burns suspected us! Remember? When we were with him, he mentioned that someone had recently shown him photos of a vase. It was Mr Johnson, who wanted to enquire about the value of the *White Dragon*. Mr Burns suspected that there might be something wrong with it. When we showed up at his shop and asked for the same vase, he told Prince Valiant... I mean, Mr Baker, of course, who then showed up here."

"But how did Mr Burns know who we were?" Bob asked, irritated. "We didn't give him our card, did we?"

"No!" cried Jupiter. "But on leaving his shop, I told him that the weirdo at The Jones Salvage Yard is my uncle, remember?"

"Right," Bob remembered. "So that's why Baker was snooping around here asking about the *White Dragon*."

"Exactly," Jupiter continued. "And of course we, including Uncle Titus and Aunt Mathilda, behaved very suspiciously in his eyes. If you remember, Uncle Titus denied the existence of the vase, and Aunt Mathilda readily admitted that the vase existed but that it was already meant for someone else. In Baker's eyes, it must have looked as if the whole salvage yard was one big warehouse for stolen goods."

Inspector Cotta nodded. "He called my colleagues when I had my weekend off and presented his so-called evidence. For Sergeant O'Callaghan, this was enough to conduct a search, although he should have realized that it was only clues that Baker had provided, and by no means evidence. In search of real evidence, Baker was here at the salvage yard the other night and stumbled into your little traps by chance."

"Well," said Pete with a grin. "Not everyone who calls himself a detective has what it takes."

Inspector Cotta gave him a disapproving look. "I can only hope that that was a verbal slip on your part, Pete Crenshaw. You don't look like the arrogant type."

"It's all right, Inspector Cotta," Jupiter said reassuringly. "We are just glad that the case is solved."

"Almost solved," growled Pete.

"Why?" Bob asked without understanding. "What's missing?"

"Well, Skinny!" Pete said. "The guy really got off scot-free, didn't he?"

“Indeed he did,” confirmed Inspector Cotta. “Unless your uncle and aunt really want to report him for trespassing, Jupiter.”

“I don’t think so,” Jupiter said and shrugged his shoulders. “The less we bother ourselves with that critter, the better it is.”

Inspector Cotta soon left the salvage yard. He was not quite out of sight when Pete was already rubbing his hands. “At last!” Hurriedly he walked towards the gate entrance, but stopped after a few metres and looked back at Jupiter and Bob in irritation. “What are you waiting for? Come on!”

“Where to?” Jupiter asked without understanding.

“Well, where do you think? To the beach! The case is officially closed! Let’s get out of here before the next one comes around the corner and messes everything up!”

Bob turned to the First Investigator with a grin: “When he’s right, he’s right.”

To their surprise, Jupiter nodded. “We should not let this free afternoon slip by. Who knows when something like this will happen again!”

Laughing, they ran off. Jupiter was the slowest, as always. So Bob and Pete were already past the yard office when Aunt Mathilda, armed with a huge tray of plates and cups, came out.

“Has the inspector left yet?” she asked. “That’s silly, I thought I’d get him a cup of coffee—”

Jupiter, who had just looked at his untied shoelaces and had not seen his aunt, collided head-on with her. With a loud roar and in a cloud of coffee spray, the tray flew through the air and landed clinking on the ground. Three of the five white-blue cups and four of the five white-blue plates broke.

The Three Investigators stopped abruptly. Jupiter bit his lower lip and looked anxiously at Aunt Mathilda in anticipation of a thunderstorm.

For seconds, she stared at the shards. Then she looked her nephew firmly in the eyes—and started to grin. “Thank goodness, now this coffee set is finally broken! I have never liked the pattern anyway. Too bad about the coffee!”